

**Messrs Stokes and Son, cart- and wheelwrights in Park Street from 1840.**



Stokes' employees at the entrance to their workshop premises in Park Street.  
Photo by H Bailey of King's Cliffe, c1900

Charles Stokes came from Collyweston to King's Cliffe in 1840 to set up in business as a carpenter and wheelwright, employing one man and a living-in apprentice. Over the next forty years, he built up the business, employing wheelwrights, carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths, farriers, painters and sign-writers, as many as thirty employees in the business' heyday. In 1880, Charles' son, Frederick, went into partnership with his father and the business name changed to Stokes and Son. They built carts, wagons, vans of every description, fair-men's living saloons and 'animal vans', carriages and, as a local speciality, the long timber-carting 'druggs' which were used by several King's Cliffe families of timber hauliers well into the last century and were a common sight in the village.



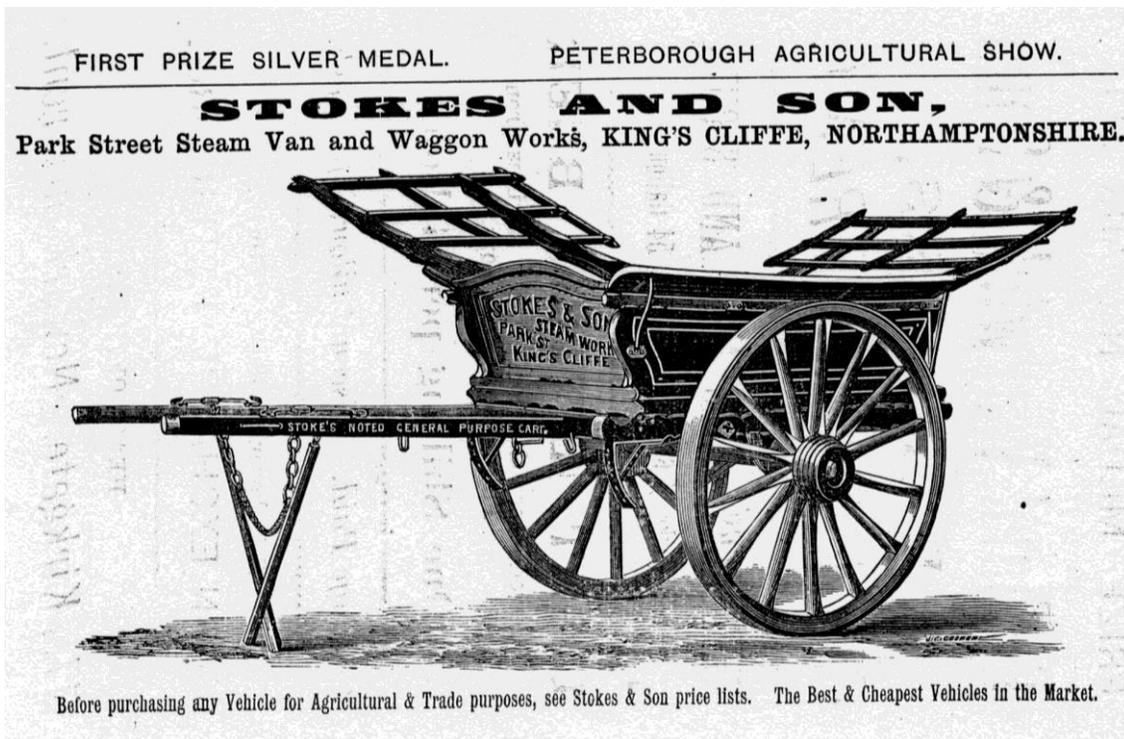
Stokes' employees with a newly-made timber 'drugg' in the yard behind Park Street, King's Cliffe, taken in 1903.

An extendable timber pole running between the front and back axles allowed the drugg to stretch, as needed, to accommodate felled trees of different lengths.

(Original photo by H Bailey of King's Cliffe)



Several pairs of heavy horses were needed to haul this timber drugg laden with a mighty oak.  
(Photographer unknown)



In the 1880s, the firm exhibited at the Peterborough Agricultural Show and their advertisements in the show catalogue were illustrated with examples of their pleasure, agricultural and trade vehicles.

In 1890, they produced a splendid printed catalogue with detailed line-drawings of their many products which were listed as:

“Estate” Waggon, price £29 10s 0d; Miller’s, Builder’s and Sanitary Carts; Barrows; Coal Vans; Hand Carts; Dairy Carts; Butcher’s Carts; Covered Vans; Camel-back Vans; Brewer’s Drays; Furniture Vans, Saloon Living Carriages; Timber Trolleys; Dog Traps; Gigs; Ladies’ Driving Cars; Governess Cars (with fringed canopy), price £23 0s 0d; Improved Brougham, price from 70 guineas; the Laudau, price from 100 guineas.”

A correspondent to the Peterborough Advertiser of 16<sup>th</sup> April 1910 describes Stokes' as having been famous for making great vans for fair people, both living quarters and animal 'dens' for travelling menageries, many of these being richly decorated:

“Some of these may be found all over England to this day, though like wood turning, it is an industry that has ceased to live. Messrs Stokes' yard in Park Street was the great rendezvous for these creations, and how many and of what sorts of fair-folks' vans have been turned out in past years from the village of Cliffe would baffle description. But the itinerant fraternity who needed new dens for homes or houses on wheels would wait until visiting a fair in the neighbourhood of Cliffe and then place their orders. This was, no doubt, in consequence of the reputation the place enjoyed up and down the country for its prowess in all manner of wood turning and carving, the latter being often a considerable item in the building of such things.”

The gates leading from Park Street into Stokes' works had a fine cartwheel as a feature in the centre of each gate. Behind these gates, Stokes' steam van and wagon works consisted of offices, a large main workshop, timber store and smaller workshops for carpenter, joiner, blacksmith, coach painter and upholsterer. The buildings were on either side of a yard with a house to the left of the entrance (now number 42 Park Street) and a cottage to the right, since demolished.



Perhaps as a result of over-investment in new plant and machinery and additional showroom premises in Midgate, Peterborough in the late 1880s, Stokes and Son went into Bankruptcy in 1891. Happily, the business was rescued by George Miles, a prosperous timber merchant with a thriving business a little further along Park Street, whose daughter, Agnes, had married Frederick Stokes in 1884. George Miles appointed Frederick Portess from Boston as manager of the business and in 1913, following the death of George Miles, Frederick Portess acquired the premises and the business which continued to run, initially under his name and later as Portess and Son. Alwyne Portess, the youngest son of Frederick Portess, was the last to use the workshops for his business as general carpenter and undertaker. The workshops were demolished in 1974 and, sadly, the 'fine pair of gates' is no longer a feature on Park Street.

*Sue Trow-Smith, August 2020*