

100 YEARS OF GIBSONS

THE GIBSONS' STORY IS ONE OF FOUR GENERATIONS, OF PARTNERSHIPS FORGED, FRIENDSHIPS MADE AND PLENTY OF ADVENTURES ALONG THE WAY.



Harry Percy Gibson

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Born on 25th January 1872, Harry Percy Gibson had his first taste of entrepreneurship in 1903, when he bought the Glasgow-founded International Card Company (ICC), a small playing card retailer, using an unsecured loan of £500 from the Royal Bank of Scotland.

ICC continued to trade during the First World War, but in 1919 it was sold and Harry Gibson founded H P Gibson & Sons Ltd. selling card games as well as board games and other novelty products.

Some products were made directly by the company at Aldersgate Street, London, while others were distributed by H P Gibson & Sons. The new business became famous for offering 'The Big Four,' a series of military-themed board games reflecting the armed forces. This included L'Attaque, licensed from a French company in the late 1920s and re-released by Gibsons this year, celebrating their centenary. Harry Percy's son Robert Gibson travelled to Paris in person to buy the rights and the printing blocks.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The outbreak of the Second World War presented H P Gibson & Sons with substantial challenges. On the 30th December 1940, Harry Aisbitt Gibson turned the corner to work to discover that all that was left of the office was a pile of rubble; it had been completely destroyed by bombing. With the help of the

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fire brigade, he managed to find the company's safe and retrieve Gibsons' charred ledgers. Fresh premises were found in Goswell Road, but just six months later, disaster struck again! Strict wartime employment regulations meant the male workforce was largely re-assigned, so the number of staff at H P Gibson & Sons dwindled to just two young ladies, one part-time.

BEYOND THE STORM

Having successfully navigated through the Second World War, Harry and Robert Aisbitt turned their attention to diversifying into wholesale distribution for other games manufacturers, including market leaders Waddingtons and Chad Valley. Demand for the company's products soared and both Gibsons' branded games and wholesale stock flew off the shelves, resulting in record results. Under the leadership of Harry Aisbitt and Robert Gibson, the company went from strength to strength.

THE START OF A LEGACY

Robert's son Michael joined the family business in 1966, on a salary of £11 a week. Little did Michael know he would still be there 53 years later. It was in the early 1970s, after the loss of the wholesale business, that Michael had a great idea. Waddingtons focused only on the games that sold more than 25,000 units per year,

and Michael realised that there were potentially profitable game titles that Waddingtons had discontinued. He advised his father to propose a licensing agreement: H P Gibson & Sons would take charge of the manufacture and distribution of these 'unpopular' titles and make royalty payments to the licence holder instead. Waddingtons agreed and soon H P Gibson & Sons were selling titles such as Risk, Travel-Go, Game of Nations, 4000 AD, and Scoop! The move was a resounding success.

DEALING WITH LOSSES

In 1969, Gibsons lost Harry Aisbitt Gibson, who is warmly remembered as a kind and caring man in spite of suffering an horrific experience during the Battle of the Somme. Then, in September 1973, Robert passed away from cancer. For Michael, stepping into his father's shoes at such a young age and with so little experience was certainly a challenge but he immediately rose to the occasion.

FORGING ON

Michael had the support of the company and also took the time to search for new staff to aid him in maintaining Gibsons' success.

Following the thrilling Spassky-Fischer match at the World Chess Championship in 1972, chess exploded in popularity. H P Gibson & Sons had their chess sets made by





a small operation in France, which struggled to cope with the spike in demand. Customers were warned that if they wanted to ensure delivery of a certain quantity, they should over-order. Based upon that advice, one customer ordered 144 units hoping to receive a dozen. The order arrived at Gibsons and coincided with the arrival of a fresh delivery. To their amazement and horror, the customer received the full 144 units!

GIBSONS GAMES

With the business well on its way to rebuilding its pre-war reputation, Michael made the decision to formalise the evolution of his company by modernising its name. In the late 1970s, H P Gibson & Sons became Gibsons Games, taking on the familiar brand identity that endures to this day.

In 1979, Michael's brother in law, Roger Heyworth, joined the company. Roger had extensive commercial experience and a keen enthusiasm for games. Michael recalled the two of them visiting the Nuremberg Toy Fair. Roger quickly grasped the mechanics of the games being demonstrated, which Michael himself found difficult to follow!

By the mid 1980s, Gibsons had over 25 board game titles. These included Diplomacy and the football game Wembley. In 1981, they took the licence for the Sherlock Holmes game 221B Baker Street, which would go on to become a best-selling title. Woolworths, at that time the largest retailer of games and toys and a very important

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customer, took 5,000 copies of each.

Gibsons licensed the wildly popular UNO card game from the International Games Co in the US. At its peak, this single game accounted for annual sales of 90,000 units and 22 percent of the company's turnover. Having built up the sales after a number of successful promotions, the game was lost to Mattel in 1990. While a blow to Gibsons, UNO's tenure with the company had helped enhance the Gibsons Games brand.

THE EMERGING DIGITAL ERA

Whilst board games had always been an important aspect for Gibsons, by the late 1980s their popularity was in decline. For smaller producers like Gibsons, the effect was profound. Big companies could afford TV advertising and had the clout to negotiate with supermarkets and absorb the small margins that came from accepting lower selling prices. For Gibsons, this simply wasn't an option. The decline in popularity of board games was also prompted by the soaring success of video games. Gibsons would need to adapt once again, and fast.

THE MISSING PIECE

In the 1980s, Michael came across a book entitled Britain from the Air. With permission, he produced a number of aerial photographs of familiar British landmarks as jigsaw puzzles. Unlike anything else on the market, the initial range was welcomed by retailers and helped Gibsons to become a prominent force in the jigsaw market.

In 1996, Gibsons was looking to expand and began a long and very happy relationship with Austrian company, Piatnik, a family business established in 1824, making playing cards and games. One of these, Tic Tac Boom, had cards with letters on and a variable timer designed like a ticking bomb. Players, in turn, had to come up with a word that included the letters printed on the card and pass on the bomb to the next player before it went off. It fitted perfectly into the new popular genre of after-dinner games.

Gibsons marketed the game in the UK as 'Pass the Bomb.' Sales

at first were average, but in 1997, the game was play-tested by Steve Jackson's game playing panel. Steve wrote a regular games article for the Saturday edition of the Daily Telegraph. They loved Pass the Bomb and awarded it their Game of the Year. Sales took off with Gibsons often struggling to meet demand. Pass the Bomb was an international best seller and has since gone on to sell more than half a million copies in the UK.

2000S

A new millennium and Gibsons Games became Gibsons. By 2001, the jigsaw collection had expanded to include an impressive 250 titles, boosted by best-selling board games and high-quality playing cards.

Michael's daughter Kate joined Gibsons in 2005. Kate's diverse academic background and experience in Marketing and Advertising Sales meant that she almost immediately found herself involved in the upper-level management of the company.

A NEW FUSION

Kate's cousin Nicki Gumbrell joined Gibsons in early 2005. With a strong background in retail and a love of games inherited from her father, Roger Heyworth, Nicki eventually became the National Account Manager. Kate and Nicki made an unstoppable team when they became Managing Director and Sales Director in 2016.

100 YEARS AND ON

2019 marks Gibsons' 100th anniversary. In response to the resurgence in boardgame popularity, Gibsons has invested in new games such as Mind the Gap and Pixit, as well as re-launching popular titles, such as 221B Baker Street, the sales of which expanded from 2,000 units to 40,000 units sold annually!

Playing games has always been about bringing people together, to laugh, relax and have fun. With luck, these simple games will be a conduit that connects the generations, enriching the lives of all, perfectly in keeping with Gibsons' values, history, and heritage.



Kate & Michael