



Rise of the Global Machinery Sales

The Cambridge Machinery Sales launched in 1941 was one of the most important diversifications for Cheffins. It has its origins in wartime shortages and the drive to produce more home-grown food. Farming was still heavily labour intensive so greater productivity could come only from greater mechanisation.

The diversion of iron and steel supplies for armaments meant that the supply of new farm machinery would be curtailed. By the outbreak of war in September 1939, the manufacture and supply of new farm machinery, and most especially tractors, had almost dried up apart from a few imports from the USA.

By the beginning of 1941 there was an explosion in the prices of second-hand farm machinery as farmers achieved new found wealth from their much improved farm gate prices in feeding a war-torn population.

This situation presented an opportunity for Grain & Chalk, led by Henry Grain and Bob Arnold who set about organising the first Cambridge machinery sale, advertised in the local press to be held on 14 July 1941.

Five tractors were offered for sale, and three of them, namely a Case Model C, a Fordson Standard (1940) and an International TK40 (circa 1941) were all relatively new and a John Deere BO model was brand new. This was to be the beginning of a major initiative to diversify and expand the core activities of the business, which now, 70 years later, has become an internationally recognised auction sale with buyers from more than 100 countries, with more than 4,000 tractors alone being sold annually.

Setting the maximum price

Stepping back to 1941, for a moment, the effects of this rapidly rising demand for farm machinery and the explosion of prices was to bring its own problems with dealers and speculators profiting from this volatile situation. In an effort to curb these activities the government introduced emergency wartime regulations and measures to limit the re-sale second-hand value of those items which were in the highest demand and shortest supply. The War Agricultural Committee appointed representatives to determine the maximum price at which certain items could be sold in the open market – a value which was based on its original new price but taking into account its current condition.

The result was a distortion of the market which failed to curb the problem. The system can be illustrated by the following example. A second hand Fordson Standard might be allocated a maximum price of, say, £150, when offered at an auction sale – this was to be the maximum, not the reserve or minimum price at which the item was allowed to be sold. What happened was that when the bidding got to £150, the auctioneer was empowered to put all the names of the prospective buyers into a hat to draw out the 'winner'.

The likelihood was that a number of bidders would have been willing to go beyond that maximum permissible price. So, after the auction, they would retreat to some secret location (or the nearest pub) to conduct a 'private' auction to determine the real price of the tractor. Once the new sale had been agreed, they divided the profit above the previous fixed open market price of £150 among themselves. This highly illegal, and perhaps immoral, practice was to be known as the 'black market' and was punishable with a severe term in gaol.

Quick growth in the Cambridge Machinery Sales

At the second Cambridge machinery sale, in September 1941, no less than 14 Fordson and International tractors were being offered for sale with a large number of ploughs, cultivators, threshing drums, chaff cutters, trailers, wagon binders and much more. It was clear that these sales were set to continue with increasing interest from dealers and farmers from beyond the local area.

The importance of the well established links with Irish farmers and cattle dealers built up over the previous 50 years with the importing and marketing of Irish cattle through Cambridge, was to become of huge benefit to the success of the machinery sales. These Irish dealers delivered their cattle to Cambridge before the weekend and then shipped machinery back after the monthly Monday machinery sale.

The location of the market adjoining Cambridge railway station, with access to all parts of the UK and east coast ports at Harwich and Tilbury, was also to become an integral part of the future success of the Cambridge Machinery Sales.

By way of competition, but on a much smaller scale to the Cambridge machinery sales, over in Saffron Walden Cheffins were holding bi-annual collective sales at The Fairground. One such spring sale was advertised for the 7th March 1942. There was no catalogue printed and it would seem that approximately 162 lots were entered at random and included the usual plethora of miscellany – horse harness, poultry equipment, huts and coops, fencing, gates, and an Amanco 4hp engine sold for £6. The machinery section included ploughs, harrows, cultivators, grass mowers and a Massey Harris seed drill which fetched £65. Only one tractor was presented at this auction, a 1936 Fordson Standard, described as being in excellent condition, which sold for £130 to Butcher & Son of Dunmow.

Compared to the Grain & Chalk's collective machinery auction, the Cheffins' bi-annual sale was a very modest affair and represented no serious competition.

The pace quickens

With peace declared in 1945, Bob Grain, having served with the 8th Army in North Africa, was granted early de-mobilisation at the special request of his father. The turnover at the machinery sales had expanded enormously and the need for additional manpower was crucial. Bob Grain's earlier pre-war training as a farm machinery salesman with Cornish & Lloyds Ltd, together with his family links to the world of auctioneering, made him an ideal choice.

It was not long before the reputation of the Cambridge Machinery Sale had spread to France and the Low Countries, initially, and then to Denmark and Sweden, with dealers from all these countries heading to Cambridge where the auctions were then being held on the first Monday of every month (except August – being harvest time).

High standards were set by Bob Grain to build the reputation of Cambridge and to attract overseas and distant UK buyers. To achieve this he was always ready to tell some poor unsuspecting vendor where he could stick his rubbish if he felt that the item in question did not meet his standards.

The world's biggest

From these small beginnings, the Cambridge Machinery Sales have grown into what is thought to be the world's largest monthly collective sale of farm and contractors' machinery. On the second Monday in the month, the Sutton sale ground resembles the United Nations with buyers from every corner of the world.

Sales records are regularly broken. Buyers return year after year. Bob Arnold, and Henry and Bob Grain could never have imagined that their initial wartime auction would now command such a global position.