



The livestock markets

Until supermarkets evolved in the mid-20th century, livestock markets were the key trading arenas for farmers, dealers and butchers, and important social gatherings for the farming community. When the new Cambridge cattle market opened in 1885, it had capacity for up to 700 bullocks, close to 2,000 sheep and large numbers of pigs, every Monday market day.

Apart from local breeders, the market was supported by some 40 Irish cattle dealers shipping their livestock cross-country from Holyhead.

The three main markets were in Cambridge, Saffron Walden and Ely. Cheffins eventually gained a dominant position in each through either the acquisition of another firm of auctioneers (as at Saffron Walden) or mergers with other firms.

The first major step forward was the acquisition of the firm of Wm Rand in Saffron Walden, in 1875, for which Henry Joshua Cheffins paid £2,800. Wm Rand had set up the new Saffron Walden cattle market in 1860 on the site of the former Bell public house in Market Street. Records show that in the late 1880s the average weekly throughput was 25-30 fat steers, heifers and cows, 80-120 fat hogs, porkers and store pigs and 180-220 fat and store sheep.

New Cambridge Market

In the mid-late 1800s, the market situation in Cambridge was close to chaotic. The Cambridge livestock market had been moved from its earlier location in St. Andrews Hill to Pound Hill on the north side of the town close by the Castle. The licensing and control of the market was in the hands of the Borough Market Committee, who were responsible for collecting the market tolls from the auctioneers calculated on a headage basis. Other markets, though, were being operated by auctioneers Grain & Long and their competitors H. Philip & Thos. Chalk on different sites in Hills Road.

In 1880, the Market Committee had reported to the main council that the income currently being received from the Pound Hill market was wholly unsatisfactory and that many representations had been received from cattle dealers and farmers that a new market should be built on a site that was close to the railway at Hills Road. In addition, the four railway companies serving Cambridge were keen to capitalise on the livestock trade.

Eleven acres of open land fronting Cherry Hinton Road was purchased by the Cambridge Corporation from Jesus College for £5,500, and on 28 September 1885, the Cambridge cattle market opened to a fanfare and celebratory lunch. And so began more than 100 years of active trading.

The two firms of auctioneers, Grain & Long and H. Philip & Thos. Chalk were licensed to operate there. Within 20 years it became one of the major markets in the eastern counties and subsequently grew into one of the biggest markets for draught horses outside London.

By 1967 both these firms had morphed into Cheffins, Grain & Chalk of Cambridge and Saffron Walden, to be joined in 1987 by the firm of Comins who, along with part of the Chalk dynasty, were active in the Ely livestock market, creating Cheffins, Grain & Comins.

Demise of the markets

The impact of the supermarkets, in particular, gradually led to the decline of these three markets. Ely was the first to close, on 7 September, 1981. Saffron Walden market followed, closing in December of that year, with Cambridge cattle market closing in 1990.

As the livestock markets declined, or ceased temporarily on occasions with the onslaught of foot and mouth disease, so Cheffins sought to diversify, making use of the market facilities, initially, for the sale of vintage farm equipment, and later for Fine Arts and Property auctions.