



The Origins of Cheffins

Early beginnings

Since 1825, the firm of Cheffins has been active in the east of England as auctioneers, valuers and surveyors. The origins of the firm lie in the latter half of the 18th century when George Cheffins sired 16 children – nine sons and seven daughters.

His fifth son, Joshua, born in 1781, became an auctioneer in Bishop's Stortford and his younger brother, John, was appointed as Steward to Lord Maynard's estates at Great Easton, near Dunmow, in February 1812.

Joshua clubbed together with other prominent businessmen of Bishop's Stortford in 1828 to raise capital to buy and demolish the King's Head public house in order to build the town's impressive Corn Exchange.

The earliest records of the business date back to 1825 and comprise auctioneers books of sales of the firm of R D Thurgood (later B T Thurgood & Sons) of Saffron Walden which was subsequently acquired by the Cheffins family.

Records exist of some of the many auction sales which took place in the yard of the Eight Bells public house in Saffron Walden, which was demolished in 1831 to be replaced with the Borough Market in Hill Street. The handsome archway still survives today, incorporated into the Waitrose development. The Thurgood firm operated the livestock and chattels market there until the 1900s.

Birth of Henry Joshua Cheffins

In 1846, Henry Joshua Cheffins was born – a grandson of Joshua – and he eventually became the powerhouse behind the growth of the Cheffins business in Saffron Walden. He lived until 1922 and laid the foundations of the present firm.

In 1860, Saffron Walden's new cattle market was set up by auctioneer William Rand largely because of the expanding trade in the town and after the local council decided that the existing Borough Market was too small, resulting in the streets becoming congested with livestock during sales. William Rand's business was subsequently acquired by Henry Joshua Cheffins in 1875 for a sum of £2,800 – which was £1,500 for the freehold premises of the market and £1,300 for the goodwill.

At this time, Henry was residing in Bishopsgate, London, and had an office in Finsbury Circus.

The date of the first major estate auction by Henry was 1879 when he sold the Moyns Park Estate at Birdbrook. This included an Elizabethan mansion, seven farms, numerous cottages and land extending to 1,546 acres. The house and 130 acres of park and woodland sold for £22,200.

Five years after setting up in Saffron Walden, Henry took a ten year lease on an imposing Georgian town house at 7 Hill Street, from a member of the well-known Gibson banking family and for whom he acted. He eventually became the principal advisor to the Gibson Trustees and the Gibson bank. The firm's office remained at this address until the mid-1960s.

Agricultural depression

For around 30 years, in the latter part of the 19th century, the results of poor weather and a series of disastrous harvests were compounded by increasing free trade with North America and other world markets. These brought about a serious economic depression in agriculture with falling produce prices and land values.

Such was the plight of farming and the collapse of farmland values, Henry had great difficulty trying to sell one particular farm known as Jacks Green farm near Takeley. A small estate with farmhouse, outbuildings and 41 acres, it failed to sell with a reserve price of £1,500 and later, when re-offered with a nominal reserve it did not attract a single bid. It was another nine years before it was sold for £660 having been offered at an upset price of £650.

This collapse in values was evident in the numerous sales being conducted by Cheffins at that time when agricultural land was selling at 60-70 per cent below the values of some 20 years earlier.

More expansion

As the 20th century opened, so Henry Cheffins embarked on further expansion. In 1903 he acquired Benjamin T Thurgood & Sons. This proved to be a shrewd move with many important sales following:

- Freshwell House, Saffron Walden: furniture and contents
- Lofts Hall, Elmdon: Chippendale furniture and antiques
- Horham Hall, Thaxted: valuable contents
- Landwade Hall Estate: 484 acres
- Clavering Hall Farm: 506 acres
- The Linton Estate: 2000 acres
- The Towers Estate, Swards End: 595 acres
- Debden Hall Estate: 4,000 acres
- Little Bardfield Hall Farms: 537 acres.

Last of the Cheffins

The firm, commonly known as 'Mr Cheffins', flourished, but in 1922 Henry Joshua Cheffins died, aged 76 years, and this was the end of the Cheffins family link but his legacy continues until this day and remains as a strong brand in the auctioneering and surveying world.