



MACHINERY SALES

Rise Of The Global Machinery Sales

By Bill Pepper MRICS

One of the oddest pieces of kit sold at the monthly Cheffins Machinery Sales was a Tiger Moth plane, minus two of its four wings, sometime in the late 1940s. It was bought for £100 by a Mr Jack Branch of Waterbeach. He told reporters: “I don’t know exactly what I’m going to do with it but I may get it fitted with the wings it needs and sell it again.”

We’d love to know what happened to the plane, if Mr Branch’s family is still around.

For most of its 70 years, though, the Machinery Sales have concentrated on farm and contractors’ machinery – tractors, harvesters, diggers and cultivation gear of all sorts, becoming the biggest regular auction of farm machinery in the world. Selling more than 4,000 tractors last year to more than 100 countries and achieving record sales of £46 million, the growth of the Cambridge Machinery Sales would have astonished its originators.

It was started in July 1941 by two partners, Henry Grain and Bob Arnold, of Grain & Chalk (which merged with Cheffins in 1967) to create a market for second hand farm machinery. Wartime diversion of iron and steel supplies for armaments meant that the manufacture of new farm machinery had to be curtailed. By the outbreak of war in September 1939, the supply of new farm machinery, and most especially tractors, had almost dried up apart from a few imports from the USA.

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 generated a huge rise in demand which resulted in massive speculation in tractors and other farm equipment.

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In an effort to curb runaway prices 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.

This created the peculiar situation where at auction a maximum price for a tractor may have been set at £150 but bidders were willing to go higher! Once the price hit £150 the auctioneer was empowered to put all the names of the prospective buyers into a hat to draw out the ‘winner’.





What happened next doesn't take much working out – the winner staged an unofficial auction in the local pub, with the proceeds over £150 being split between the unsuccessful bidders and the winner.

A major networking venue

Today, at its saleground at Sutton, near Ely, Cheffins attracts machinery from throughout the UK which is auctioned each month and shipped all over the world. We have had a storming couple of years, driven by the world shortage of second hand machinery and the weak pound sterling.

An important feature of the Cheffins Machinery Sales is the networking opportunity it offers buyers, sellers and dealers from all over the world. Each sale attracts some 1500 or so people and a lot of information is exchanged and a lot of private deals are made among them.

We have generations of buyers and sellers – one family in the south of England is up to their fourth generation attending our auctions.

What has given the Cheffins Machinery Sale such pre-eminence? Apart from working hard for 70 years to offer the highest quality of machinery and service, I think it is something to do with Britain's past reputation for tractor production – Massey, Fergusons, Marshalls and so on – plus the British Empire! During its glory days, Britain exported not only machinery

but also agricultural know-how – and I think this history is embedded worldwide.

We have more than 20,000 active members on our worldwide database and, clearly, the internet is a major aspect of our marketing. In the near future, I believe this will become even more significant in how we do business, with the likelihood of on-line machinery auctions.

With monthly sales records regularly broken and buyers returning year after year, Bob Arnold and Henry Grain could never have imagined that their initial wartime auction would now command such a global position.

CAMBRIDGE AND BRISTOL Machinery Sales



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