

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Neil Lanham, Life as a Suffolk Auctioneer

Neil Lanham provided an interesting insight into the role of a Suffolk Auctioneer to the September meeting of the Heritage Circle at the Rickinghall Village Hall. He used anecdotes and images to illustrate his entertaining talk which focussed upon his involvement with agriculture.

The auctioneer is very important as he is at the point where supply meets demand and the price for goods of all types is set. Neil Lanham began his professional life at the age of 17 in 1955 when he was apprenticed to the Cambridge auctioneers, Grain and Chalk, now Cheffins. His widowed mother had to pay the firm £150 for them to employ him.

Neil's initial responsibility was to produce drainage and farm plans, a tedious task. Eventually, he was promoted to work in the market with his fearsome boss and told that he was going to sell lots. This made him very nervous and so he went out to look at how other auctioneers in action. He came to the conclusion that he had to adopt his own style rather than mimic others. When selling lots it was vital to record the price, and the name and initials of the buyer. He practiced speaking prices quickly. This became automatic and so he could then concentrate upon conducting the bidding in the room by noting who had bid, and remembering the reserve price and commissions which were exact bids set in advance.

Michael Spear, an auctioneer from Wickham Market, offered Neil a job which he came to love. He often sold large and small animals, produce, furniture and timber all on one day at a market. Then he had to write up all of the accounts of lots sold and calculate the commission in the evening. He had an important place in the community and came to know all of the farmers. There were scams where people would try to buy lots fraudulently and so it was important to be careful who he sold to. Similarly, 'rings' of buyers had to be challenged when they tried to depress the price of lots.

Neil was ambitious and was tempted by an offer of a possible partnership by Boardmans in Haverhill. This was a failing firm with Dickensian methods and staff. Within six months, Neil aged 23 found himself as initially manager and then the owner of the company which he modernised and made into a successful enterprise.

Auctioneers have a number of roles. They undertake stocktaking valuations. These often happen with change of ownership of businesses such as shops, garages and public houses. These can require use of specialist equipment, such as for dipping beer barrels. The valuer also has to develop techniques for estimation, especially on farms. The number of sizeable potatoes per root gives an approximation of the tonnage per acre. It is possible to assess the height of a tree when valuing standing timber. They have to judge by eye the weight and value of animals on the hoof. On other occasions, an auctioneer has to sell properties and their contents in situ. Finally, the auctioneer must market effectively as the success of auctions depends upon lots being publicised to as large a range of buyers as possible. Posters and adverts must have impact and tell a story. Auctioneers have a complex, but fascinating, job.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 22 October at Rickinghall Village Hall when Neil Lanham will be speaking about *Foul Murders in East Anglia*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy