

Setting The Benchmark



Schokman and Samerawickreme have been the pioneer chartered auctioneers in Sri Lanka. Family bonds and trust have propelled the company throughout its journey of 125 years. Integrity has seen the auctioneer expand to become a reputed valuer as well as realtor. Currently headed by the third generation of the Samerawickreme family,

the auctioneer firm strives to be more relevant in the digitized 21st century. Navinda Samerawickreme, Managing Partner, Schokman and Samerawickreme looks back on the company's journey and their plans for the future.

By Keshini de Silva | **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Schokman & Samerawickreme celebrates 125 years in 2017. Looking back on the company's long journey could you tell us about the milestones achieved?

Schokman & Samerawickreme was started by my grandfather, the late Mr Edwin De Alwis Samerawickreme and a friend, Mr Schokman, a British Planter who was domiciled in Badulla. Grandfather met Mr Schokman at the Ceylon Turf Club in Nuwara Eliya. And that is where the discussion for the company started. They built up this friendship and realised they had the same kind of interests, especially when it came to furniture and other similar products. Eventually, they started selling by auction, which was at the time a totally new concept in Sri Lanka. Auctions were not a well known service to Sri Lankans, especially in Badulla.

It began in a simple way. When foreigners or rather the British families left the country they would dispose of their furniture. This exchange of goods through auction was more like a Sunday evening get together, quite an informal and fun gathering.

Looking back towards the origins of the company, as now we celebrate our 125th year anniversary in 2017, we can proudly say that while introducing auctioning to Sri Lanka, we have also fairly expanded the business.

In terms of the milestones of the company, one of the initial key developments was the move from Badulla to Kandy. The first formal office was established along Trincomalee Street in Kandy at my grandfather's house. Later the Schokman and Samerawickreme office moved to our ancestral house along Peradeniya Road, which was also where we were born. Unfortunately, after this move we do not have

any records of Mr Schokman. My father used to say that Mr Schokman, who was a bachelor and was working in Sri Lanka as a planter, went back to England. After Mr Schokman's departure to England my grandfather continued this business, maintaining the name of Schokman and Samerawickreme. The next generation to continue the responsibility was that of my father, Shirley Samerawickreme, and his brothers. He was the second youngest in the family. Together with his brothers, my father introduced auctioneering to Colombo. This became quite popular in Colombo, especially as at the time, one could not readily purchase electrical appliances and certain furniture items in the market. Therefore, they had to wait for a foreigner, or expatriate, to leave the country as then they would auction their appliances as well as furniture. These auctions provided Sri Lankans with the opportunity to purchase unique appliances and furniture.

These Auctions Gave Sri Lankans The Opportunity To Purchase Unique Appliances And Furniture When One Could Not Readily Purchase Those Items In The Market.

Even today the Head Office of Schokman and Samerawickreme is based in Kandy, the City Office with the Auction Room is located along Havelock Road and the Flagship Auction and Sales Facility is along Isipathana Mawatha. Customers even purchase furniture directly from the Flagship Store as well, without waiting on the auction.

Could you elaborate on your auctioning services?

We have also expanded our auctioning services, which are now conducted Island-wide. We organise and manage auctions for various sectors.

One of our main auction categories is furniture and antiques. These auctions take place at a designated location including at our Flagship Auction facility. For example, when clients desire to auction their assets as they move out of their houses or are migrating, we then organise the auction at their residence or premises.

The Family Bond Is A Strong Legacy, Which Has Helped Us Survive In This Type Of Business Environment.

Another key service is the vehicle auction. At present we sell 300 – 400 vehicles a month through auction, including the three-wheeler and motorcycle to the super luxury car. We manage the auctions of most of the financial institutions in Sri Lanka, dealing with their repossessed vehicles. Our clients include the LOLC Group, Commercial Credit, Commercial Leasing, Alliance Finance, DFCC Bank, HNB and Seylan Bank. Many embassies and foreign missions deal with us, even for their real estate transactions.

Schokman & Samerawickreme is the only auctioneer to persevere while also maintaining its integrity in the market. Could you tell us about this?

Schokman & Samerawickreme is an auctioneering firm and a family owned company, which has been operated by the Samerawickreme's for 125 years. There were several other players in Sri Lanka, primarily auctioneers rather than firms that specialise in the area. The family bond is a strong legacy, which has helped us survive in this type of business environment.

We are very open, transparent and do our level best for all the clients.

The trust and reputation we have built has been vital to our journey. For example, if there are furniture or antiques for which a value is not known, if Schokman and Samerawickreme ascertains and assigns a value the buyers and sellers are ready to trust and believe us. We set the benchmark in the industry and these are eventually the factors that matter in terms of our development.

Schokman and Samerawickreme speaks for itself.

I must also not forget the faithfulness of our staff, the great dedication of our previous generations and former staff whose collective efforts have helped us in reaching this level.

What about the current management of Schokman and Samerawickreme?

Today, I represent the third generation of Samerawickremes' to manage the business. I am the eldest in the family and am the current Managing Partner; I also

have two sisters and a brother. My brother Anuja Samerawickreme is a Partner and CEO while my youngest sister Gayintha Samerawickreme acts as the Head of Operations. My son, who is now 25 years old, is currently pursuing a different field. However, I hope that my brother's children, and perhaps even my son, will one day take over Schokman and Samerawickreme as the next generation. I hope there will always be a Samerawickreme generation at the helm.

Auctioning Is Like A Performance. On The Day Of The Auction You Have To Have Everything Falling Into Place To Ensure A Successful Or Good Completion.

Auctioning is not at all an easy job. It is hard work and I feel that it has to be in one's blood. It is like a performance. On the day of the auction you have to make everything fall into place in order to ensure a successful or good completion.

What have been your more recent pioneering developments and introductions?

Our Flagship Auction and Sales Facility is a unique new introduction. Although you could purchase second hand furniture, there is no particular store for such items. Our showroom is therefore the biggest outlet for the purchase of second hand furniture as well as antiques in Sri Lanka.

We are also ISO 2015 certified for our auctioning and valuing. This is an upgrade from our previous ISO 2009 certification for the same. In obtaining these systems certifications we indicate the international standard procedures and guidelines which have been implemented in our operations. Everyone who is employed at Schokman and Samerawickreme follow these guidelines and the younger staff and associate staff are all trained in these systems. Though our associate staff may have not studied to a higher level, they are also an essential part of our team. These staff are responsible for the careful lifting of furniture and for arranging the store. We invest time to train them to adhere to the systems certification guidelines.

Since its inception, Schokman & Samerawickreme has diversified. Could you tell us about your other subsidiaries?

We have a furniture transport company called Mr Move. We also conduct valuations for antiques and also real estate and property. The value assessments cater to various client requirements such as for insurance purposes or as part of their migration process. We have also diversified to include real estate brokering, especially for the diplomatic community, in our portfolio.

All of these diversifications are connected with the core operations of Schokman and Samerawickreme. We are a well known and respected name in these sectors. For example, a customer who would purchase furniture and antiques from one of our auctions or from the showroom would perhaps require the facility of transporting these items. Before a customer chooses to auction something they may require the item in question to be valued; therefore we are able to offer such a client our valuation services. Ultimately, every business operation is connected.

What type of customer experience does Schokman & Samerawickreme try to provide?

We cater to both the seller and the buyer. We are a middle man; therefore, we really strive to provide the best of our services to both sides. They are both important to us and their satisfaction is central to our operations. We go the extra mile for both the seller and buyer. If a seller wants 100 rupees for an item we strive to provide a return of 110 rupees. We however must keep in mind that the buyer is also our client and therefore that 110-rupee transaction must be fair to the buyer as well.

What are your views on the demand for antiques in Sri Lanka's design landscape?

Antiques are immensely sought after in Sri Lanka. From the past, Sri Lanka has been famous for furniture. Even in the good old days, our ancestors collected these valuable pieces of furniture. It is difficult to find Sri Lankan antiques today. However, there is a huge demand, especially amongst the Sri Lankans living overseas and the expatriates who reside in the country. They go crazy over our furniture and antiques because they are produced from good, valuable timber and are well-made. There are also certain significant ancient designs for which we have seen quite a demand.

Through The Web Portal We Have Developed, When The Auction Is In Process, Customers Will Be Able To Log On And Bid From Wherever They

Are In Sri Lanka.

In catering to this demand, a challenge we however face is in terms of exporting these furniture items to buyers overseas. You require an export license for these transactions and also Government regulations have been drafted in a manner to ensure that antiques and other heirlooms of Sri Lankan heritage are kept in Sri Lanka. This difficulty in export too has piqued interest for Sri Lankan antiques.

Any thoughts on the second-hand vehicle market, especially in terms of vintage luxury vehicles?

The general second hand vehicle market in Sri Lanka is very much in demand at the moment because there are restrictions in the import of vehicles as well as restrictions in financing. Currently customers cannot obtain a full lease on a vehicle. Therefore, the second hand market is strong. Many of those who attend our vehicle auctions are those who are engaged in buying and selling vehicles. They come from across the Island, from Jaffna to Polonnaruwa, Kandy and Galle. When we hold the auction in Colombo, they purchase vehicles and market them to those in areas throughout Sri Lanka. Therefore, through our auctions you see vehicles being reutilised all across the country.

Vintage cars are not an area into which we have ventured out to completely. There are proposals on the pipeline, to hold vintage car auctions similar to our antique furniture auctions. But we are still toying with that idea. Although we have not auctioned as much of these vehicles in the recent past, there is a demand for these luxury vintage cars in Sri Lanka.

What are are the future plans for Schokman & Samerawickreme? Are there plans to digitize the auction process?

The future is always IT based. Customers do not want to spend an entire day viewing and bidding to purchase a bed or table. Therefore, we are introducing our online live auction web portal to coincide with our 125th Anniversary on July 12, 2017. Through the portal that we have developed, when the auction is in process, customers will be able to log on and bid from wherever they are in Sri Lanka. Our clients will be able access the bidding facility through any smart device including

their phone.

Schokman and Samerawickreme have come a long way. We must be thankful to our family, our patrons and customers as well as to our staff for propelling the company to this level. There are more expectations from us for the future, however, at present, we are very satisfied with what we have achieved.

