Perkins Engines and Farm Life

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Introduction

Perkins Engines was founded in Peterborough in 1932 by Frank Perkins and Charles Wallace Chapman. Charles, the technical director, designed the engine that made the small, fast diesel practical, and within a generation Perkins engines were working on farms around the world. At one time, one in five tractors worldwide ran on a Perkins.

That put Perkins at the heart of the farm life that country vets served, from the tractor in the yard to the standby generators that keep a practice running today.

Beginnings in Peterborough

Frank and Charles met in 1929 at Aveling & Porter of Rochester, Kent, a famous maker of steam rollers, traction engines and ploughing engines for farms. When its parent group collapsed in the Depression, the two men set up on their own. F. Perkins Ltd opened on 7 June 1932 in Queen Street, Peterborough, with Frank as chairman and businessman and Charles as technical director.

The breakthrough. Diesel engines of the time were too heavy and slow for road vehicles. Charles solved this with a new combustion chamber and fuel injector, sketching the first design with Frank at his home in Strood, Kent. His design became known as the Perkins Aeroflow system and stayed in use until the late 1970s.

Their first engine, the four-cylinder Vixen, ran that December. In 1935 Perkins became the first company to hold six world diesel speed records, and by the Second World War it was building the P4 and P6 engines, developed under Charles, that made its name.

The young company played a major part in the war effort, building 1,485 engines in 1941 alone. Charles designed the Perkins S6 marine diesel for the Royal Navy's air-sea rescue craft, then left the board in 1942 to concentrate on war work. In 1947 production moved to a new factory at Eastfield, which is still Perkins' headquarters today.

Rooted in farming

Frank Perkins was born in Peterborough in 1889 into a family of agricultural engineers. Their firm, Barford & Perkins, made farm machinery and road rollers, and Frank spent much of his life on the land.

Period	Frank Perkins and the land
1890s	His grandfather builds up Barford & Perkins in Peterborough
Before 1914	Farms in Hertfordshire rather than joining the family firm
After 1918	Takes on a 400-acre farm in Herefordshire
1920s	Develops dairy and sterilising machinery at the family firm
Later life	Runs a small arable farm near Peterborough

He was made an honorary freeman of Peterborough in 1962 and died in 1967. Part of the A1139 through the city is named Frank Perkins Parkway in his honour.

Diesel comes to the farm

Big diesel engines were already used in heavy farm machinery, but Perkins' lighter engines in the 50–70hp range were just the right size for tractors. By 1938 its range already included agricultural versions.

The Fordson Major. From 1948 Ford offered a tractor version of the Perkins P6, the engine developed under Charles in 1937, fitted at the factory in its Fordson Major. It turned an under-powered tractor into a 45hp diesel workhorse.

The Massey Ferguson 35. Built at Banner Lane in Coventry, the MF35 switched to a Perkins three-cylinder diesel in 1959. Almost 390,000 were built in all, and many still work on small farms today.

The Fordson Dexta. Ford's smaller Dexta tractor also ran on a Perkins three-cylinder engine.

One in five. At one time, one in five tractors worldwide was powered by a Perkins engine.

Passing it on. Charles also wrote *Modern High Speed Oil Engines*, a three-volume textbook that became standard reading for engineering apprentices and students.

Massey Ferguson and beyond

In 1959 Massey Ferguson, Perkins' biggest customer, bought the company outright, though Perkins kept its own name. Frank Perkins stepped back from management but stayed on as chairman, and by 1961 the firm employed 6,000 people.

New owners. Perkins passed to LucasVarity in 1994 and to Caterpillar in 1998, which claimed the deal made it the world's largest diesel engine maker.

Beyond the tractor. Perkins engines also powered JCB machines, a familiar sight on farms, until the 2010s.

Today. Perkins builds diesel and gas engines for farming, construction and power generation. About 4,000 people work at its Peterborough site, and in 2014 it built its 20 millionth engine.

Perkins and veterinary life

Perkins never made anything for vets, but for decades its engines powered the farms that country vets visited every day.

Charles's legacy. Charles was an engineer rather than a farmer, but farming remembers him. The Irish farming news site Agriland calls him "the forgotten engineer by whom we have all benefited", and some engineering circles regard him as the father of the modern diesel engine.

The mixed practice. For much of the 20th century, country vets treated farm animals, horses, dogs and cats alike. One vet who qualified in 1976 recalled that farm work made up about 90% of his first job in Devon, and that Beccles in Suffolk then had around twelve mixed practices.

On the farm round. Mornings were spent on farm rounds, with calvings and night-time caesareans in the yard. These were farms increasingly worked by diesel tractors, Perkins-powered models among them.

Dairy roots. Before diesel, Frank Perkins' own work was on dairy and sterilising machinery, the same dairy world where farm vets look after herd health.

From farm to small animal. Farm work has since declined. That same Beccles practice now has eleven vets who see only small animals and five on farm work.

Keeping the lights on. Today Perkins is a major maker of diesel generators. Standby generators like these keep power running when the mains fails, something any round-the-clock practice relies on for theatres, kennels, fridges and incubators.

A Kent connection. Charles sketched the first Perkins engine at his home in Strood, and he and Frank met at Aveling & Porter of Rochester. Both are in Kent, the same county as the practice in Margate.

Timeline

Date	Event
1889	Frank Perkins born in Peterborough
1897	Charles Wallace Chapman born in Lancaster
1929	Frank and Charles meet at Aveling & Porter, Rochester
1932	F. Perkins Ltd founded in Peterborough; the Vixen first runs
1937	P6 engine developed under Charles
1942	Charles leaves the Perkins board for war work
1948	Perkins P6 offered in the Fordson Major
1959	Massey Ferguson buys Perkins; the MF35 gets a Perkins diesel
1967	Frank Perkins dies
1979	Charles Wallace Chapman dies, aged 82
1998	Caterpillar buys Perkins

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107–109 High Street, Margate CT9 1JT
01843 808344
enquiries@vintagevetpractice.co.uk
vintagevetpractice.co.uk
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