**Voices from the Trade: Oral History interviews**

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One of the core strands of our research project into the antiques trade in the 20th century is the series of oral history interviews with prominent antique dealers. The aim was to try to build a picture of what antique dealing was like across Britain in the 20th century from the perspective of those directly involved in the trade. The decision to include oral histories within the project was based upon a recognition that the late 20th century in particular has been a turbulent time for the antiques trade, with large numbers of antique dealers closing their shops or retiring, or modifying their trading activities. In order to understand how and why this happened, and also what trading was like in earlier decades, we wished to speak to those who experienced the antiques trade first hand.

We have collected our oral histories through an interview or structured conversation with selected Antique Dealers. While we did ask questions, we tried to let the conversation flow naturally, so that interviewees were encouraged to talk about the things which interested them and to take the interview in the direction they wished to take it. The resulting recordings form an extraordinary history of the C20th antiques trade which will live on as an oral history archive.

Through the collection of our oral histories, we have been looking to capture views from antique dealers across a broad time-frame and geographic area. We began by targeting retired or semi-retired members of the trade who we know have been involved in buying and selling antiques for a long time. We tried to access dealers who had specialised during their careers so as to get a view of how different kinds of antiques were being traded and when. We also focussed on prominent dealers – those whom we felt would have had involvement across the trade – and who could tell us about other dealers they connected with.

So, what have we found out?

***Getting started***

One question which we asked all of our interviewees was how they got started in the trade. For many, this question brought back memories of early days in their shops, for others, minimum wages, lowly duties and lots of heavy lifting.

For the majority of our interviewees their start in the trade was with a family member – parents or grandparents, uncles or aunts. Interviewees often recalled a childhood relationship with antiques – from being given antiques as a gift, like Antonia Agnew, to buying and selling at 10 years old, like Lennox Cato. The reason so many of our interviewees had family connections in the trade is because we actively sought out second and third generation dealers in order to get a sense of trading across the century. However, for every dealer we spoke to who had gone into the trade following a family connection, there was an individual who had self-started.

There were also those who chose not to follow family into the trade, but who had ended up returning to it later in life. For example Tim Corfield, whose father owned Corfields of Lymington in Hampshire. Tim went into the army, and stayed there for nine years, training as an engineer, before returning to antiques and establishing a business of his own. There were also those whose families actively ‘encouraged’ them to ‘go it alone’. Christopher Payne, whose relatives had antiques businesses in Melton Mowbray dating back to 1900, recalls his father’s insistence that he go to London and experience the antiques trade there before he considered joining the family firm.

Regardless of their start, all of our interviewees discussed the process of learning the trade. For those starting in the 1960s, 70s and 80s the means to an education was by one of three routes: one, an apprenticeship – usually informal – within an established business; two, a stall at Portobello or Gray’s – often learning through trial and error; or three, a position with an auction house, Bonhams, Phillips, Sothebys or Christies.

Philip Astley-Jones recalled his training with Roger Warner in Burford. Paid £5 a week in 1965 he received a systematic training in how objects were catalogued and recorded; how the showrooms were laid out and when to move objects around to keep the space looking ‘fresh’. He also recalled buying trips up to Glasgow, then across to Edinburgh and back down again – Roger liked to travel in a westerly direction with the sun behind him. Buying strategies on the trips came with strict instructions: for example, the purchase of all oak chests under £50. Advice included always looking in things and on top of things – tin rolls stored on the top of bookcases often contained paintings or needlework which could prove a valuable find.

For Andrew Jenkins, starting with David Tron and Gordon Sutcliffe in Chelsea in 1963 and also paid £5 a week, the day began with washing the windows and cleaning dog muck off the front step of the shop. Andrew recalled his worry that, as a University graduate, being, at that time, in the top 3 or 4% of country, someone who knew him would see him washing windows and wonder what had gone wrong. His embarrassment was compounded by having to ask his father to subsidise him as £5 week was not enough to live on in London in the 60s. Nevertheless, David Tron took Andrew’s education very seriously. He gave him afternoons off to go to the V&A to visit the furniture galleries and set Andrew exams on things in the shop. Andrew had to write essays which would then be given to David to mark. Andrew told us that he was, and I quote, ‘sure that David never read them, I always got about 6 out of 10’. However, the research he undertook to complete them gave Andrew a wide knowledge of antique furniture, enough to establish his own business in 1964.

For those working their way into family businesses the learning process was similar. Harry Apter recalled with pleasure the excitement of the ‘hunt’. Out in the car with his father and grandfather to auctions or house sales or the shops of other dealers, always wondering what he was going to find. Harry remembered that they would often stop the car before they got home in order to get the item out to see whether he had made a mistake or not.

For those who started at Portobello or Grays, the introduction to the trade was far less formalised. Kathleen Skin, who started at the Red Lion Antique Market in Portobello in 1951, remembers it as something of a free-for-all, with stalls selling anything and everything and stall rental prices low enough to provide a good profit margin. At the start, she told us, there were no shops on the road, so the market, held on Wednesdays and Saturdays, was very popular. Kathleen came to Portobello by accident. Having trained as a teacher she took a stall during the school holidays and, when it started to turn a profit, on Saturdays during term-time, eventually turning to trading full-time. In the 1960s, Kathleen reported, Portobello changed with the houses along the road becoming shops and the stalls getting smaller and more expensive. Business also became riskier. Kathleen remembered in particular a trader, who specialised in jewellery, having her bags stolen from under her stall - losing thousands of pounds worth of jewellery in one afternoon. Kathleen’s decision to specialise in buttons came from observing a gap in the market during her time at Portobello. She learned her trade from the Stevensons, who sold buttons and antique fabrics at the market. When Portobello became too expensive, Kathleen moved to Grays and traded as *Kath’s Button Box,* she remained there well into the 1980s.

Traders Peta Smyth, Kate Thurlow, Felicity Marno and Antonia Agnew, starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, remember a much a more structured environment at the antiques markets. For Felicity, her time at Grays in 1979 was highly instructional. A neighbouring stall-holder, Christopher May, was an established expert on porcelain and undertook to teach her the basics. He would bring her items to handle and identify. Through this process, she gained a broad-base knowledge of ceramics from which was able to establish her own business, Stockspring Antiques.

Peta Smyth originally took a stall at Portobello in order to sell off items from friends and family, along with some costumes from the National Theatre and her childhood stamp collection. Working at Portobello, she learned not to put all of her stock out at once – especially small items such as stamps – because they would sell too quickly and too cheaply and leave her with nothing for the next market. After a stint working for other dealers, including early oak specialist Joanna Booth, Peta decided to establish a ‘proper’ stall at Portobello, focussing on antique textiles. This time round, her stall was successful, enabling her to move onto a space in Kensington Church Street and then her shop on Moreton Street in Pimlico.

Before their time running their own stalls, both Antonia and Felicity had undertaken the newly established Christie’s Study Centre course as an introduction to art and antiques. Access to auction rooms was another way in which would-be dealers learned their trade. Coveted ‘porter’ roles at Sothebys and Christies in particular gave hands-on access to high quality items. Christopher Claxton Stevens started in January 1971 as one of the first two ever student porters that Christie's took on. He was employed for six months between leaving school and starting university. While he was working there, the Dodge collection of French furniture came up for auction. Christopher recalls [and I quote] ‘a wonderful [writing table] … with Sevres panels’ which ‘more or less quadrupled the world record for a piece of furniture’ at a sale. Christopher happened to be one of the two porters holding the item up during the sale. The table became heavier and heavier as the price rose and rose, eventually selling for around £170, 000.

***Trading premises***

Visual memories were very strong with our interviewees. Every dealer who we spoke to remembered the look of their premises; the way in which they displayed their objects and how they advertised their stock. Shops came in all shapes and sizes. From the ‘shoebox’ described by Lennox Cato to the Manor House extended with ‘additional wings’ occupied by Phillips of Hitchin.

Post World War Two, a number of dealers found themselves in converted premises, offices, homes or shops built originally for other purposes. This could make organising and displaying the objects difficult. Bill Beaton, for example, recalled a post-war shop in Dundee which had originally been an office and consisted of a series of rooms opening out from one another, culminating in a back door which faced the back entrance to Woolworths, described by Bill as not ‘particularly good company’ for an Antiques Shop.

For many, shop premises were also a home, with dealers, especially in the early days, living ‘above the shop’. The need to move out – so more space could be given over to stock – was seen as a marker of success. Andrew Jenkins keenly recalls his first shop, Avon Antiques in Bradford-upon-Avon, starting out as two rooms in 1965, growing to nine rooms by the mid-1970s. The increase in retail space necessitated that Andrew and his wife moved out of their living quarters above the shop. The shop was then expanded further to include a workshop with two full-time furniture-restorers working on site.

Up until the late 1970s, dealers recalled a ‘pile it high’ attitude to shop display – packing in as many objects as they could and inviting potential buyers to, in the words of Harry Apter, ‘dive in’ and see what they treasures they could find. The majority of our interviewees could remember a shop – theirs, their parents, one they visited – which was like an Aladdin’s cave, with furniture stacked in towers along the walls; piles of rugs, tapestries and fabrics heaped on available surfaces; and smaller items – ceramics, glassware, silverware – dotted about the place.

The outside appearance of shops was also a firm source of recollection. Andrew Burne had particularly clear memories of his father’s shop in Mayfair. Featuring a Georgian bay window for displaying items, the shop also had a phonograph machine outside which people could put a penny in to listen to music. Andrew also recalled moving from Mayfair to ‘downmarket’ Chelsea in the 1960s and the issues with displaying in the window at the shop there. At the time, the bulk of the firm’s trade in glass was selling to other dealers, and if an item was placed in the window another dealer would be reluctant to buy it as it could be identified as W G T Burne’s piece – other dealers wanted the pieces that no one else had seen.

The need to advertise to buyers outside of the trade gathered momentum throughout the 1960s. Dealers recalled preparing their shops for images for advertisements. According to our interviewees, the 1960s and 70s half-page, full page or spread advertisements in publications such as *Country Life*, *Connoisseur*, *Apollo* and the *Antique Collector* were one of the best means of advertising antiques shops. *Country Life*, especially, was seen as providing a ‘veneer of respectability’ in the 1960s and 70s. A half-page advertisement was expensive, but raised awareness of a business to both private buyers and sellers.

Some dealers went further. Jerome Phillips recalled writing short articles on various objects for the *Collector’s Club* and then compiling the articles into a catalogue for a themed ‘exhibition’ within the shop. The exhibitions showcased particular types of furniture – walnut and mahogany pieces in the 1960s and early 70s, then more specific items, such as metamorphic and campaign pieces post-1978, when walnut and mahogany became difficult to obtain. The exhibitions created a simulated museum display within the shop: imparting information about the objects but also, unlike a museum, offering them for sale.

Dealers recalled using displays to showcase particular items and organising others to form ‘room sets’. The ‘room set’, as described by a number of our interviewees, was a means of gathering furnishing items together to simulate a space in the home. For dealers such as Andrew Jenkins, the room set enabled private buyers to equate items with those in their homes so that they could almost immediately see how something would look in their own house.

This shift towards a minimalist approach in display also coincided with the rise of the Antiques Fair, where the best items would be showcased on an uncluttered stand. Andrew Jenkins swapped his advertising budget from a half-page in *Country Life* to a stand at the Grosvenor House Fair in the 1970s. The cost was more or less the same and the increase in trade which resulted from the change, made it, he commented ‘probably the best thing I ever did.’

***What changed?***

One of the things we were keen to learn through collecting the oral histories was what had caused the difficulties experienced by the antiques trade during the closing decades of the 20th century. Therefore we discussed changes within the trade with each of our interviewees.

Key changes in the trade as perceived by those we spoke to were: a shift away from trade-to-trade sales to private business; the loss of the great house sales; a downturn in the UK-US market; the rise of the Antiques Fair; antiques programmes on television; an increase in other means of buying antiques – the internet for example; and the lack of a market for antique, or ‘brown’, furniture.

The shift away from the majority of sales being to trade, was something which all of our dealers commented on. There was a consensus that private buyers now make up the larger proportion of sales and that this change is highly significant. However, the ratios differed from dealer to dealer, dependent on the nature of the items being traded.

Kate Thurlow, a furniture-dealer, estimated that 90% of sales were to the trade when she started in the 1970s. By the close of the 20th century, in Kate’s words: ‘It's gone completely the other way’ with 90% of furniture sales going to private buyers. For Leon Sassoon, specialising in carpets and tapestries, numbers of sales to the trade and to private buyers were [and I quote] ‘pretty much 50-50 ... certainly from my era from 1967 to, say, 1987’. Now, however, for Leon, trade sales are more or less non-existent.

Almost all of our interviewees commented on the huge impact that house sales had on the trade in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Peta Smyth, for example, fondly remembered buying up masses of antique textiles at house sales across the country in order to establish her business in Pimlico. And Kate Thurlow recalled a knock-on effect of the great sales: the ‘little auctions rooms’, which existed everywhere in the 1970s because nearly every estate agent had a goods and chattels auction room.

For Bill Beaton and Tony Lumb a stand-out sale was Cusworth Hall in Doncaster in 1952. Tony Lumb described the property as a ‘time capsule’ – he said, and I quote, “The furniture was just where it had been made for, and [my father] said there was no need to turn anything upside down to have a look because everything was perfect, original, 100 percent”

The drop in house sales in the 1980s resulted in the modification of trading practices for many established dealers. Philip Astley Jones recalled how Roger Warner had had to change his business. For Roger, fewer house sales resulted in more buying trips as he had to cast his net wider in order to get the same number and quality of goods. With less stock to sell, Roger slowly graduated to opening his shop by appointment only and then closing the shop and selling privately to individuals. Philip believes that the lack of house sales directly impacted on Roger’s decision to close down the business.

Specialist dealers were also affected by this change. Leon Sassoon commented that when the great house sales were at their peak ‘there were carpet and tapestry sales … every week in London’. Leon would buy enormous amounts knowing that other dealers, particularly those from overseas – German, French, Italian, American - who couldn’t attend the auctions themselves, would come to his shop and buy 20 or 30 items each. The quick turn-over meant that he was always on the look-out for stock, but as the sales ceased so did the number of goods available and stock and sales dwindled.

The loss of the great house sales was also directly linked to a downturn in the UK-US antiques trade. Fewer house sales resulted in fewer antiques and fewer American traders visiting UK dealers. For a number of our dealers this shift correlated with the increase in importance of the Antiques Fair.

While the rise of the Antiques Fair in the latter half of the century was seen by most of our dealers as positive change to the trade, the fact that the Fairs had become the *only* international shop window for dealers came under some criticism. Harry Apter stated that the percentage of business from fairs in the closing decades of the 20th century was much higher than in the early days. Part of this was due to the fact that overseas visitors would *only* visit the Fairs. Harry recalled ‘the Brown Mile’ – the Fulham Road – when there were 14 antique shops all in a row. American dealers would take a couple of days to ‘do’ the Fulham Road, buying pieces from each shop. By the close of the century Americans wished to attend an ‘event’, so fairs such as Masterpiece which provide excitement, and in Harry’s words ‘razzle dazzle’, became the norm.

Similarly, the rise of antiques programmes on television provoked debate amongst our interviewees. For Tony and Mary Lumb the initial impact was positive. Tony recalled a high point in the trade in the north of England in the 1980s. A ten leaf annual flyer proclaimed "Harrogate: antique centre of the north". Tony estimated that there were over eighty dealers in Harrogate and the surrounding area in the early years of the decade. The birth of the Antiques Roadshow and Arthur Negus becoming an ‘antiques celebrity’ was cited by Tony and Mary as one of the reasons for the boom.

For other interviewees the proliferation of antiques programming towards the end of the century brought back uncomfortable memories of ‘hobbyist’ dealers. Andrew Jenkins recalled that in the 1970s antique dealing became a fashionable thing to do. Retirees who thought that setting up an antiques shop was a nice thing to do and who never saw themselves as being ‘in the trade’, made up approximately 40% of all dealerships.

All of our interviewees agreed that the one area of the trade which has suffered most, is antique furniture.

Jerome Phillips discussed a fundamental shift in the market, using an example of a plain mahogany d-end Sheraton-style card table priced at £1500 and a John Lewis reproduction at the same price. Of the two, the reproduction would be the one which would sell. For Harry Apter this shift in buying culture was an indicator of a change in lifestyle and education. For Frank Partridge, a change in building types: smaller rooms in smaller houses, or pent house living in a glass box with no walls to place your bookcase against. For others it was simply about taste – ‘brown’ furniture just isn't fashionable any more; it does not fit with modern, light interiors. In the words of Harry Apter: ‘Antique furniture has a secondary value in today’s market – a single painting earns an auction house so much more than a whole room of furniture’.

***Conclusions***

It remains for me to thank those who have generously given their time to speak to us and to share their views of the antiques trade in the 20th century.

Thank you to all our Interviewees!