# CHARACTERS OF THE TRADE

It was in 1946 that I was taken by Mr Smith, a dealer in Skipton, Yorkshire, to their warehouse store in an old double-fronted Victorian shop piled with antiques and junk of every kind, even with goods hanging from the ceiling. Somewhere in the centre was a small solid fuel stove, and to reach it was somewhat like a maze. In an easy chair in front appeared to live his grandfather, who told me the following story of his life around the 1890 period. He was one of three brothers. Early each morning after breakfast they were given five gold sovereigns, and, after harnessing horses to flat-bottomed carts, set off in different directions to buy antique items for stock from farms, cottages and homes that could be reached in a day. Their father had a heavy hand, and if, say, the going rate for a warming pan was one shilling and sixpence and they had paid more, then a hiding and no supper was their reward. On the day in question the old man told me he reached a farm, and looked in the barn before knocking at the door asking if they had anything old to sell. Under a heap of hay he had spotted a large carved oak bulbous leg, which on examination proved to be one of four, and part of a table with a massive oak top. With help from the farmer it was finally loaded on to the cart, but his full five pounds had gone, and he had to admit that he had never seen another table like this, and so had no idea of its value. The nearer he got to home the slower he went; would he or would he not get supper? When his father saw the table, he looked at it for a long time in silence, and then had him put it into the top store and lock the door. Shortly after, supper was served to all the family.

Saturdays, for the Smiths, were always interesting, being a day when London or Leeds trade buyers might come off the midday train. On such a day a few weeks later, in a top hat, such a buyer came. He asked for any old oak. Father Smith told his son to run up and open the top store, and then run off quick. The buyer, seeing the table, first enquired the price, and then from where it had come. He then said, 'Can I speak to your son and tell him how to pack it and put on rail?'. As the father's back was turned, he slipped a card and a golden sovereign in to the boy's hand with the words, 'If you ever see another table like this let me know'. And the boy, from that moment onwards, became a dealer himself. Before I left I purchased an early wood and metal chandelier for fifteen pounds, which I was told had been hanging in the shop for the past forty to fifty years. I also had a completely dehydrated side of bacon thrown in with it, which had also been hanging there since 1900. I sold the chandelier to Tom Burne of Rous Lench, Evesham, the great oak and ceramic collector, for forty five pounds. When sold after his death, it fetched two thousand three hundred pounds and I again became its owner for a short time. The side of bacon I had given away years before. This visit was the first of many over the years ahead.

My first purchases from 'Runner Smith', as we called him, who lived at Wheatley, west of Oxford, were three carved oak religious figures for three pounds ten shillings. This was around 1946. Perhaps I should explain that a runner is a dealer whom having bought something, runs or takes it to the nearest likely outlet for it. Seldom having a shop of their own, they often had considerable knowledge, and formed a very important part of the antique trade. In fact, they still do, covering all parts of the British Isles, at all levels of the

trade. Probably the best item he ever brought me was a Delft blue dash Adam and Eve charger, purchased by him in a cottage in the Burford area. After I had paid for it, he sighed and said, 'I have been after that plate for eighteen years, and I have only owned it for two hours'. This plate was very similar to the damaged one that I had bought in Wantage on the day I first saw Burford. One or two other dishes of this type I know turned up in this area, and this to a degree shows how very many there must once have been.

Runner Smith was not the only supplier who attached himself to me. Our other friend was 'Ali Baba', in other words, Mr Jarvis and his sons from Middleton Stoney. They would arrive at the back gate, he would walk up the garden shouting to announce his arrival, and I would be led down the garden to a sheeted open van. Clapping his hands he would say to his sons, 'Take it off'. The tarpaulin would be pulled back, and he would then announce that the chair he was showing me was a very fine specimen, and I would point out that it was damaged. Clapping his hands again, he would say, 'Lads, open the box', and a large chest would be opened and the contents shown me. Perhaps seeing something that I liked I would enquire the price and be told, 'Forty pounds, I've just paid thirty pounds for it'. I would say that this was far too much and he would say, 'Mr Warner, how much is it worth to you?'. My offer might be ten pounds, he'd then say, 'Look, I'll throw this stool in. I know it needs a couple more legs but that is easily done, call it fourteen pounds the lot, and it's yours'. I would reply 'No, ten pounds is my price'. 'Well', he would say, 'that will show me a fair profit; it's yours, Mr Warner'. This method employed by Mr Jarvis was perhaps one of the best examples of free entertainment in the trade.

It was in the 1930s that my friend Ian Floyd, then dealing in Petworth, was called to a local house to buy a dining table. An appointment was made, but on arrival, he was kept waiting for sometime. Eventually, a very crusty man arrived, who demanded an offer for his dining room table which was a fine, if massive, two pillar dining table. My friend's offer being accepted, immediate payment was rudely demanded by the owner, who then said that it could not be taken away before 2.30pm the following day '..after I have lunched on it'. So the following afternoon my friend arrived, and, with the help of the butler, carried the table out to his car. Just as he was about to drive away, the butler said, 'Oh sir, aren't you taking the whole table?' Going back to the house he was shown, stored in another room, two further sections, converting it into a very fine four pillar dining table.

A somewhat similar experience happened to my one time friend, Morris Dodd, the antiquarian book dealer of Carlisle. Again, a difficult owner, wishing to clear his small library in a house near Kirkby Lonsdale, reluctantly accepted Morris's offer, and told him that all the books in the room must be cleared. When Morris Dodd suggested bringing his car across the lawn to be near the window for easy loading, the owner refused to allow it. The books were packed in sacks and carried across the room to the hall, down the steps and so to the waiting vehicle. Just as Morris was about to drive away, a sash window was pushed up and the owner's head appeared. 'Stop!' he shouted, 'You haven't carried out the bargain; you've left some books behind'. Morris Dodd was led back into the library, where, in a corner, underneath a shelf, was a cupboard which proved to be full of the best

books that had been in the room. They included an album of silhouettes by Edouard, one of which showed an early scientist, with a skull of an elephant on which was perched a butterfly. This I later bought from him, and it is now in the Museum of History of Science in Oxford.

My meeting with Dame Edith Sitwell was a brief one. I must have been out or engaged with other customers and unaware of the arrival of her party, none of whom I knew. Seeing a group in the 'Garden Room', the name given to the ground floor room of my barn showroom, I heard an altercation going on. 'But what will you do with it? You don't need it', and then a very firm authoritative voice saying 'I shall sit on it', and the chair she was looking at was sold. One of my regrets is that customers never had labels round their necks with their names on, and I was surprised, when walking a customer up the garden one day, to see my helpers and family all staring out of the windows. It was only later that I found that I had been talking to Lawrence Olivier. Perhaps I am just not very good at recognising people. It was only a week or two later that I was told by my local barber when I went for a hair cut, that I had had Walt Disney visiting my showrooms.

Perhaps auctioneers are no more varied than the rest of humanity, just that their differences are more publicly displayed. The first I ever knew was Richard Turner of Bentham, the local auctioneer, who was known as 'two pun ten for a good fat cow' by all and sundry. Although it was said that he did not speak in his own home, he never stopped doing it when on the rostrum. How different a personality was Peter Wilson, Chairman of Sotheby's whom, over the years, I got to know well, particularly at the famous Mentmore sale conducted by Sotheby's 18-27 May 1977, where he singled out those to whom he was willing to bow, and those to whom he would offer a handshake. Then there was the local auctioneer at Bloxham, when I first came to live in Burford, who was probably the slowest and most boring I can ever remember. When selling, he usually only managed around forty five lots per hour, while in London probably nearer one hundred and twenty were being sold. I never experienced the auctioneer at Barmouth on the coast of Wales - a woman surprisingly - who had the unfortunate habit of suddenly and without warning stopping a sale with the words, 'We've sold enough today. I'll continue selling tomorrow' (or next week, as the case might be). This was usually at a sale far up in the hills, when she knew that some of those attending had to get home to milking, but it was of little help to those dealers present who had perhaps come for one particular lot and would have to repeat the journey later.

Undoubtedly, Henry Spencer of Retford was the greatest showman of them all, and while I attended few of his sales, can clearly remember one of them. Before the start of that curious sale, which took place at Scarisbrick Castle on 29 November 1963, (It was inland from Southport, where I had spent the night with my travelling companion, ex-Wing Commander G.B.), I wanted to make some enquiry, but not to make myself known to Henry Spencer. However, when my friend walked in, he was greeted with the words, 'Sir, when you walked into the Southport Hotel last night, I said to myself, 'There's a gentleman, and he has come to my auction. What can I do for you sir? Sit down'.

When the sale started, we were crowded into a very small room, in which were numerous portraits to be sold, and he said; 'Now my name is Henry, and I want to know all yours; Christian names I mean. Just bid up for anything you want, and I won't even

ask you for any payment, and in a few weeks' time I'll tell you if you've bought it or not'. Then, A slight problem has arisen'. It was in fact a very big one, over the scheduling and entailed fittings. 'Just bid up', he said, 'and enjoy yourselves' and, for reasons unknown, everyone bid, but I am still uncertain if anything finally left the house. If not, it was a sad chance that a Dutch dealer, calling in London the day before the sale, saw the catalogue, came up and outbid me on every lot that I should have liked. There were half life-size carved oak figures of riders on horseback and wonderful gothic carvings of every imaginable type, installed by Pugin, the nineteenth-century architect, some of which were mounted on the oak-roofed great hall, where the Dutchman was at an advantage, having brought opera glasses with him. The house had been filled with all these oak carvings around 1840, and many are still to be seen there.

At another North Country sale, there was a particularly tatty collection of fans, mostly badly damaged, which Henry Spencer was trying to sell. He excelled himself, pleading with the ladies at the sale. 'Please don't look at the fans; that is nothing to do with it. Remember the beautiful women who have once held them. Yes madam, nearly as beautiful as you are. You must have one; just one more bid'. Every lot was sold. It is said that on the day of an important auction, he spoke to no-one, had a run, and had champagne for breakfast. On his return home, he would go straight to bed, and, with the aid of a marked catalogue, work through the whole day's sale, noting buyers' names, prices and other bidders. I cannot be sure if this is true, but he was an outstanding auctioneer. I probably loved him less, when, at a large Yorkshire country house sale at which I had bought an early lot, he held up the entire sale by announcing my name, and that I was part of the BBC's *Going for a Song* programme, and wasn't it wonderful for him, Henry Spencer, to have me there, and weren't they all lucky to be able to see me in the flesh. It was most embarrassing, and I left the sale soon after. It was, I believe, at a charity sale in Dorset that a friend of mind had left commissions, and when the sale was over, hastened back to see if he had bought anything. He was surprised to see a member of the ring also returning to the sale. 'What are you doing?' my friend asked, and received the reply that the man had brought the Vicar his takings from the ring. As the sale was in aid of the Church, the members of the ring thought they ought to include the Vicar in their dealings.

Looking back, I had many opportunities that I never took up. The first was probably about 1947 when for twenty five shillings weekly I was offered a shop in St Christopher's Place in London, just off Wigmore Street. This later was taken over by the Tollers who ran their extremely successful antique treen business from there. Then in 1948, about a year after re-opening after the War, I was approached by my customer, by now a friend, Charles Wade of Snowshill Manor, who said, 'Give up shopkeeping, come and join me at Snowshill, and when I am gone I will leave you the remains of the Wade fortune, and everything will be yours'. This was before either of us had married, and after a short consideration, I said 'No'.

I first met Charles Wade during my first six months of trading. I have no clear recollection of meeting his great friend and near neighbour Commander Hart, who lived in Chipping Campden, whom I was to meet a year or two later, but over the years I and many others got to know him well. He lived in Chipping Campden High Street, and

sometimes, perhaps feeling lonely, would lean over his side stable door and say, 'Are you interested in old things, you'd better come and look around' and would then take you round his house filled with collections of objects of every kind formed over many years of naval voyages. Every item had a story and I can remember, both before and after the war, saying to him that he ought to write them down, but he said that he would never get round to it. However, one day, in the mid 1960s, he said, 'Well, I don't mind telling the stories if some one else will write them down. You can bring along with you anyone you like'. I prevailed on one of my auctioneering friends to come with me and we started making an inventory of the contents of the house, every now and again being joined by Commander Hart who was then in his early nineties. He had been in the Navy for most of his life, but thinking ahead to retirement, had decided that Chipping Campden was where he wished to live, and that Trinder House was the house that would suit him best. However, old Mr Trinder was still living in it as had his forebears for the past two hundred and fifty years. He agreed to sell the house on condition that he continued to live in it as long as he was alive. Commander Hart agreed, saying, 'Very well, I will pay you for the house now and you can live in it as long as you want, but when you have gone it will be mine'. As Mr Trinder was agreeing, Commander Hart added that there was one condition, 'You tell me the little stool over there has belonged to your family ever since the house was built in the seventeenth century, you've got to throw that stool in'.

Following Commander Hart's last voyage in the Navy, returning to Portsmouth, he found a telegram awaiting him, telling him that Mr Trinder had died the previous day. From then on Commander Hart, known locally as Sinbad, became a leading citizen and feature of life in Chipping Campden. Both my auctioneering friend and I were busy, and it was seldom that we could find time to meet together to continue making the inventory. While we were doing it, Commander Hart unfortunately had a stroke, followed by another and his death. Prior to this he had suggested to me that I might like to buy everything in his house for the sum of some twenty thousand pounds. Knowing that he had nephews and nieces, I did not feel that this was quite the thing to do, nor perhaps had I that amount of capital available, because again a condition of purchase was that Commander Hart might go on enjoying what I was buying for as long as he lived. So what had been intended as an inventory became the catalogue for an auction sale that took place late that Summer in a barn just outside Chipping Campden. This sale attracted dealers from all over the country, including Scotland.

Following the death of Mrs Telford in Grasmere, her husband approached me in 1960 offering their shop and business for a very nominal sum, to run as a North Country base, provided I would allow him to go on living in the house which adjoined the shop premises, close to Dove Cottage. At the time my wife was unwell, and, much as I loved the Lake District, I turned down this offer. Even now I am not sure whether this was a right or a wrong decision. Then the firm of Greenwoods of York told me that there was a wonderful bygone collection coming up for sale privately, and was I interested. Instead of rushing northwards as I should have done, I said no. The bulk of it in due course found its way into their show rooms, some of which I bought piece by piece. Then that curious firm, Burrows of Scarborough, suddenly deciding to close down, wrote to me and, instead of dashing northward, I delayed for three days, thereby missing many rather wonderful

things that they had for many years on display and not for sale. The Burrows firm is interesting. Having begun early this century, in I believe Chester, they had a series of show houses-cum-antique shops stretching from Chester to Shrewsbury, somewhere I believe in Lancashire and then in King Richard II's house on the Quayside in Scarborough.

The Rev. Sharp, known in the trade as Tea Pot Sharp, had started as a Vicar in Rutlandshire with some five hundred parishioners, but I don't think his heart was fully in the Church as tea pots obsessed his mind and after he had five times as many tea pots as parishioners he decided to start selling the tea pots and retired to live near Guilfdord, where in the stable yard of his relatively small house he set up a number of museum type rooms, one being a village school, one a village church, a cobbler's shop, an eighteenth-century barber's, as well as others. Once a year he travelled to Malvern, where many years before he had won the race that takes place annually across the top of the Malvern Hills, and it was on these visits that he called at Burford. I can't remember how many times I visited him at his home in Surrey, but the last time he was unfortunately out. His little maidservant said, 'He will be back within an hour, please, please do wait, he would love to see you'. But knowing that it was a long journey home I said, 'I am afraid I must go'. This I believe was probably one of the biggest mistakes of my life, as a short time afterwards he died, all his collections came on the market through London auction rooms, but now I believe he had possible other ideas for them in which I played a part.

In September 1948 there was an auction sale at the Manor House at Duns Tew, Oxforshire, where lying on a bed in an upstairs attic bedroom I can remember finding three *grisailles,* that is black and white wash drawings, of boats, done in the eighteenth century, which we were able to buy for the sum of two pounds seven shillings and sixpence. When I went to collect this lot after the auction I found one of them sadly had disappeared. Although some eleven pictures were purchased at this sale, all of them being found in the attic by the auctioneers, one was by L'Anglois and was dated 1818 and bore a label 'Lady Hertford'. Otherwise I had no other recollection of this picture but do clearly remember a larger panel picture of a pike with painted details of its size and weight and date, it having been caught in the mid eighteenth century in a lake in the Oxfordshire area. This picture we sold to a New York dealer, later to see it illustrated in an advertisement in the American magazine *Antiques* as a very fine example of an American primitive painting. It was then sold to one of the leading collectors of American primitives, as undoubtedly American, a fact however she began to doubt. So she was delighted when a year or so later, visiting my shop and myself talking about pictures and showing photographs, she spotted this picture which she promptly returned to her supplier in America.

My mother was spending the weekend at the Great Western Hotel, Paddington . When reading her book in an upstairs lounge, she found herself near two women who had just met and were discussing 'what to do with it all'. It seemed that they had inherited a large house somewhere in the country and had no idea what to do with all the old contents. My mother did not know how to watch my interest best, and did nothing, which is how I myself behaved later when, sharing a lunch table at the Edinburgh Arts Club, I could not help overhearing the conversation of an elderly solicitor and an Edinburgh bank manager regarding the clearance of a flat full of antiques and old things. I, too, did nothing.

59. R.W. at auction in the 1960s.