

ROGER WARNER

*Memoirs
of a
Twentieth Century
Antique Dealer*

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These are due first to my mother who made all things possible and gave the tone to the business. During the fifty years of trading too many people gave help for their names to be listed individually but I would like to thank in particular my main helpers: Miss Seisyll Watkin, for her superb record keeping; Gabriel Olive, Lawrence Darton, Phyllis Talbot, Jack Wilsher, Sheila Biggane, Philip Astley-Jones and Charles Goatley. Thanks are also due to my wife and business partner Ruth, and to my children, all of whom gave so much in different ways; to Jim Pym for his invaluable help with the manuscript; and to Anthony Wells Cole, David Jones, Alison Lee and the Regional Furniture Society who made this publication possible.

ROGER WARNER



1. Roger Warner

INTRODUCTION

'That's a typical Roger Warner chair' commented an Oxford undergraduate once when looking into my Burford shop window. This has set me musing over my past stock and exactly what were the special characteristics of the things that I selected. A Roger Warner chair certainly had to have character, but also had to be a bit different from its usual type. I have had plenty of 'standard' regional chairs, from West of England Windsors to Lancashire spindle backs, but have always kept a look out for the unusual; those exceptions that spark interest and remark. In addition to those special or odd constructional features that one sometimes finds, patina has always interested me. This was a quality that was only just starting to be recognised in the 1930s. Its recognition was in large part due to a dealer named Captain Foot who had a shop in the High Street, Oxford. His stock, chiefly of walnut or mahogany, incorporated many then common items but all had a wonderful faded quality that shone out. 'Bottled sunshine' he called it.

When starting out in the antiques business my financial resources were very limited, which made me buy things that I could afford. When, for instance, the prize lot at a sale was, shall we say, a sofa table of high quality ogled by all, I would look for items for which few other buyers were prepared to bid. This was when I began buying four-poster beds, which were unloved by dealers due to the work involved in taking down and re-making. Large kitchen cupboards were also items largely ignored by the trade. I remember my first purchase of this kind, a cupboard of the type usually found in Shropshire, that incorporated a large long-case clock movement at its centre. I bought this 'white elephant' for an opening bid of one pound only. I have always liked a lot for my money either in bulk, as with beds and cupboards, or in quantity. I did not always realise that what I was buying in quantity could sometimes turn out to be quite rare. 'Normal' categories of things, such as card tables or run-of-the-mill Chippendale pattern chairs were not pieces that I tended to buy. I went for the 'one offs' and in time became more knowledgeable about these. All this, to some degree, influenced the style of my stock in trade.

Before going into the details of the development of my own business, it seems right to look back to the general development of the wider antiques trade from about 1900. Many significant outfits started off as something else and only evolved into antique traders at the very beginning of the century. For example, in 1968 the firm of Moss Harris and Sons celebrated their centenary and in the introduction to their centenary book they describe how they began as a second-hand shop. This was at a time when many homes were throwing out their old things, including much eighteenth-century mahogany and satinwood furniture, in favour of smaller scale and more convenient modern items. The firm gradually came to specialise in finer stock and established a thriving business in central London. Sadly, the company is no more and their stock-books have been destroyed, as is the case with so many of the last century's significant concerns. But I have a record of furniture that I sold to Moss Harris and I am glad to remember at least one set of chairs that I sold appearing in their Oxford Street, London, showrooms.

An equally important, but different kind of business was Messrs Williamsons of Guildford, Surrey, whose roots stretched back to 1800. They started as cabinet makers

and upholsterers in the eighteenth-century tradition and then developed through second-hand furniture into antiques in wonderful premises on The Hill in Guildford. Their stock was known for its variety and they cultivated loyal customers. Queen Mary was a frequent visitor. Somehow, whenever I visited it always seemed to have a gloomy atmosphere but I now realise this was because the business was being slowly wound down. I can just remember being invited to tea in the Williamsons' home, The Quarry, Guildford, but got to know Mr Williamson and his daughters much better after they moved to a small house next to my bachelor uncle. The daughters would chat keenly about their upbringing in the family firm. For example, they always got excited when they heard that their father was going to Bristol; they knew something interesting would be bought there. One of their relatives became art advisor to the newspaper tycoon Randolph Hearst but, interestingly, he was looked on askance by the rest of the family. During the Second World War I paid a couple of memorable visits to Williamson's premises on Guildford High Street. I could do no buying, but I did gain one of the last sights into the storerooms of a nineteenth-century antique furniture business.

The south western and midland counties were in easy reach of Burford and I became informed about all the major established antique dealers in these areas. In some cases, I was able to acquire old photographs of their shops. Collectors of curiosities have travelled to Hereford since the days of Horace Walpole and the county was also a good hunting ground for myself. The main dealer in Hereford was J. W. Stephens of Church Walk. Like many shops in historic towns, this was situated at the edge of the cathedral close, so as to be associated with the antiquity of the place's ecclesiastical treasures. Stratford-on-Avon had antiquarian pedigree of a different type. The most prominent dealer there was Oliver Baker, whose shop was on Henley Street where he displayed a varied stock, including oak furniture, along the pavement. Further north, the Lake District was, it seemed, an almost limitless source of archaic furniture and carved oak as well as items such as panelled settles or 'couch chairs'. Although much of this was stockpiled in larger centres such as Preston, Lancashire, Westmorland itself had some shops. A well-known supplier was Townson's Lakeland Gallery, Windermere, which dealt in oak furniture as well as smaller curios.

It was on my first visit to Scotland, after the war, that I remember finding, with delight, Love's of Perth. They had a room filled with nothing but mechanical barrel organs at twenty five pounds each. I regret that I only bought one. And then in Frederick Street, Edinburgh, about 1949, there was a gallery room filled with over two hundred long-case clocks of every description. The dealer whose property they were told me that he had a standing order from an American doctor to send him one hundred and fifty clocks every few months. The doctor ran a mental hospital and, on arrival, each patient was given a clock, told to take it apart then re-erect it. When this was done and the clock was working, the patient would be discharged and given the clock as a parting gift. All the clocks were sold at a uniform price of twenty pounds each. I was told that I might select any I wanted and remember buying a small red lacquered specimen with a square brass dial.

The firm of S. Richards of 77 Houndsgate, Castle Street, Nottingham, who began business in the late nineteenth century, need some recognition because from around 1885-99 they issued a small printed catalogue with hand drawn illustrations of the items on offer and their prices. The eight copies that I have, including that of 1885 which is



2. J. W. Stephens, Antique Dealer, Church Walk, Hereford.
First visited by RW in 1924

4 INTRODUCTION



3. Oliver Baker's shop, Henley Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, about 1912



4. Townson's Lakeland Gallery, Windermere, Westmorland.
The shop is decorated to celebrate the Coronation of George V, 1910

Jan 1923
The Connoisseur

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5. Advertisement for *The Old World Galleries*, Duke Street, London.
From *The Connoisseur* magazine, January, 1923

number ten in the series give a very interesting idea of what at that time was considered collectable. A Japanese Imari porcelain shaving bowl was eighteen shillings and sixpence and a Nottingham salt glazed bear baiting jug, with slight fault, was four pounds. All items were given very detailed descriptions.

In London, in 1906, the firm of Gill and Reigate of Oxford Street issued a tiny booklet, their eighth, with photographic illustrations and prices of items in their stock. A fine Chippendale mahogany bureau cost seven pounds ten, and long-case clocks were at twelve pounds ten shillings. They stated that they had the largest stock of genuine antiques in London. Litchfield of Hanway Street published another illustrated printed catalogue of stock, including ceramics.

It is, however, the stream of illustrated and priced booklets issued over a number of years by F. W. Phillips of the Manor House, Hitchin, who started in 1883, that give an invaluable record of what was once available and in such quantity. Sadly, none of their catalogues is dated, but they cover the first quarter of this century and have titles such as *Old English Furniture*, *Inexpensive Furniture - Items under Ten Pounds*, *Elizabethan Furniture*, *Charles II Furniture* and *Georgian Furniture*.

There are three sources from which the trade can obtain stock, from auction, privately, or from a fellow dealer. I have never been able to decide which I prefer. Auctions provide the excitement of competition, but frequently do not offer the exact type of item wanted. All too often they enticed one into buying something purely because it appeared cheap. Private buying has the great advantage of producing fresh goods, items probably never seen by anyone else, and which have often not been on display or sale before. However for the younger, new dealer, it poses one great problem, as my experience has been that owners seldom if ever name a price, and one is forced into the position of making offers for items that one has never seen or handled before, and with fair trading in mind, may offer too high a price.

Privately owned items are generally in a home, and are often shown to better advantage than when moved into a shop or show room. Seldom is much known of the family from whom they came, and often I learned too late about their history or background. A country house near Swindon is a good example of this. When passing through a store room cluttered with items of scientific interest, I did not know that the grandfather had been Astronomer Royal, and that these were part of his own private collection. Perhaps the greatest mistake with private buying is to acquire a collection of something that one has never bought before, for a sum well below the current market value, without in fact being aware of this. This happened to me in my pre-war dealing days, with a collection of enamel patch boxes which I bought soon after opening my shop, and I was never again able to adjust the going rate to the sum of four shillings and sixpence, which is what I paid for each of them.

Buying from fellow dealers is a good way of introducing fresh goods into one's own area. Over the years, for example, I have sold, in the Cotswolds, a very large quantity of goods that I acquired from colleagues in Scotland. This *Memoir* contains many accounts of my encounters with my fellow men and women of the trade, many of whom I got to know very well. It includes, also, recollections and stories told by older dealers whose memories stretch back to 1900 or earlier. But in addition to my long term memories, I

have stock books with details of purchases and sales, day books noting sales and customers, cash books with comings and goings, diaries of daily activities and my *Annual Review of Policy Report*, which started in 1950. It is this information upon which the book is based.

When the shop of Roger Warner opened in 1936 at Burford in Oxfordshire with capital of six hundred pounds, little thought was given to the future, or that some seventy seven and a half thousand items would be sold before it closed some fifty years later. All in all, a total of around two and a half million pounds worth of stock would sell, with items going to museums as varied as The National Portrait Gallery, The Victoria and Albert Museum, The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, The Science Museum in South Kensington, London, and to provincial museums from Edinburgh to Aberdeen, York, Bristol and Reading, to name only a few. Other things went to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, and New York, and also to the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, the Afrikaner Museum in Johannesburg and to collections in New Zealand. To a certain extent, I have grown into the business of antique dealing, and I am happy to set down an account of my development and observations along the way.