

THE WAR YEARS

The advent of war shows itself in my stock book by the severe drop in the quantity of items purchased. During the first nine months of the year only nine hundred and sixty items came into stock, with an additional two hundred purchased between the declaration of war and December 31st. War was declared on 3 September 1939, but really had very little impact on any of us, apart from four evacuee children in our home. In October, seeing there was a sale with tapestries at Roehampton, London, I travelled up by train, and bought four Mortlake tapestries of the seasons. I found myself wondering if I would get home easily in the blackout, or if the tapestries - mounted on frames - might be bombed before their delayed delivery to me. A week later one of my cousins got married in Cambridge, and a fortnight later another was married in Guildford, both events I had to go to. At Christmas, having said goodbye to the four evacuee children who had returned to London, we went to spend it as usual with my uncle outside Bristol. Earlier that month there had been a sale at Amesbury Abbey near Salisbury. On the lawn was a stone sundial pedestal and large lumps of stone from the original mansion house which had been demolished some two hundred years before following a fire. My commissions were successful in buying them, and I sent one of the smaller Burford builders with their van to collect. On arrival they were confronted by the Head Gardener, who said that no vehicle had ever been on the lawn, and they had to drive into Salisbury to the Labour Exchange, and there get the help of six men, who with difficulty, dragged lumps of stone across the lawn onto the van. When these were eventually delivered to me, the builders said they would never again do a transport job for me so long as they lived.

Shortly before the declaration of war, on 19 and 20 July 1939, what was probably one of the more historically important sales I ever attended took place following the death of May Morris, the daughter of William Morris, at Kelmscott Manor, a few miles south of Burford. I think everyone's mind was more on the future than on collecting at that moment. Most of the items were laid out in rows in a field adjoining the Manor House, and it poured with rain solidly for two days, soaking everything. Apart from my Somerset aunt, myself, Professor Rothenstein and another representative from the Ashmolean Museum, I don't think anyone present had any real interest in William Morris himself, which was probably why I was able to buy all his initial marked silk handkerchiefs, his blue working smock, a dress belonging to May Morris and numerous other items, all of which sold quickly, mainly to London buyers, but many of which, I believe, were destroyed some months later due to the war.

Oddly, with the declaration of war, there was no real change in trading pattern. Less was selling, but this soon righted itself, and buying went on very much along my normal lines. Glancing at my private account book, I am surprised to note that in the first half of 1940 I was still paying subscriptions to the London Stamp Club and Junior Philatelic Society, and spent some eleven pounds on postage stamps for my private collection. I spent a little more - thirteen pounds - on antiques for myself, but this did not include an eight shilling book on tapestries, and an investment outlay of fifty pounds on a superb pair of walnut William and Mary torcheres (candle stands), which I was to sell some forty five

years later for over eight thousand pounds. It was the previous year however, in May 1938, that I had purchased from stock a considerable number of items which I liked too well to sell, many of which are still in my private ownership. They included the cabriole leg, yew wood Windsor armchair, which had cost five pounds ten shillings, as well as a yew stick-back Windsor chair on turned legs which had cost thirty shillings.

It must have been around March that my first call-up papers arrived and, no doubt due to my long Quaker background, I registered as a Conscientious Objector. Early in June, before my tribunal was due to be convened in Bristol, I had left the shop and taken myself to Spiceland Civilian Relief Training Centre, near Cullompton in Devonshire, which had just started, run by John Hoare, a Quaker. He had, a year or two earlier, acquired fame by running the Duke of York Camps, the first opportunity for public schoolboys and lads of their own age from the East End of London to live and work together under canvas.

Some two weeks before my departure to Devonshire, I had a second visit from Queen Mary, together with a large party including the Duke and Duchess of Athlone. This seemed to mark the end of my four years as an antique dealer. By this time Queen Mary had learnt a lot about me. I eventually left Burford in June 1940, and did not return to trading there for seven years. For reasons I now find hard to understand, I left my mother and a friend, Betty Ford, with the job of closing down the shop. In many ways it would have been much tidier if I had done this myself, but there must have been at the time a good reason for my not doing so. The shop continued until August 1940. During this time one auction of considerable note took place at Minster Lovell, not far from Burford, where, on my instructions, my mother bought a set of Queen Anne period polychrome needlework curtains. One of these I can remember her posting to me to look at, and I had it hanging in my army bell tent when running a children's camp at Spiceland. After four years of continuous buying, it was almost impossible to stop, and I see that within a week of my arrival at Spiceland I had cut dinner one day to leap on a bicycle and go to a local farm sale, where I bought a hanging corner cupboard for a pound. In fact, I had no possible use for it, and later had to abandon it.

That summer of 1940 at Spiceland was a memorable one. Never having been to boarding school or university, it provided my first real experience of communal living. Instead of receiving expected tuition in useful ploys such as cooking, basic carpentry and such, I found myself in charge of a camp for evacuee children, something that I knew nothing about, but learned quickly. I had purchased locally a second-hand bicycle for twenty five shillings, one of many that the Automobile Association were selling off after the ending of their road patrols. This cycle was to prove useful for chasing those children who ran away from the camp, hoping to make it to the local station or the main Exeter road, and I soon had teams of helpers keeping an eye out for such events. At night, the heavy drone of German bombers could be heard overhead as they made their way to South Wales targets. If awake, the children who had come direct from their bombed homes in Plymouth panicked, sometimes saying that they only had Gran, both parents having been killed. Summer ending, the camp came to an end, and so I went back up the hill to Spiceland Training Centre. Almost immediately, a telegram arrived, and I and Dorothy Street were invited to go to London to help with evacuation there. It was in a tube station that I opened a letter following my conscientious objector's tribunal, giving

me exemption from military service subject to doing specified jobs.

On 23 May 1940, shortly before going to Spiceland, a sale took place at Grove, at Westonstowe in Shropshire, which I always think back to with regret. In the house was a notable collection of tapestries and needlework, much of which I wanted, though I had very little available money, and no awareness as to whether buying of any kind was sensible, the war not having really got going. When the tapestries were offered, I appeared to be the only bidder interested and the auctioneer in his wisdom decided not to sell them. It was therefore something of a shock, when, at the end of the sale, a textile dealer from London arrived and somehow managed to buy privately every tapestry in the house as one lot. Possibly my financial situation would not have allowed me to compete, but I can remember insisting that the buyer allowed me to have at least three panels which I particularly wanted. There was also a quantity of seventeenth century needlework, some of which I bought, selling one item to Edward Neale of Preston, who was at the sale, who told me what pleasure he was going to have in cleaning it.

By August my mother had closed the shop, let our house, and soon followed her brother up to Newcastle-Upon-Tyne for the duration. From then on she, I think, like myself, finding the complete cessation of buying difficult if not impossible, did over the next four years acquire a number of items both from her friends and dealers she got to know in that North East area. At the time, one of my cousins had married a vicar who lived near Durham, and who had an almost empty house in which larger purchases could be stored. On my rare weekend visits to Newcastle-upon-Tyne to see my mother, we spent much of our time going round the antique and junk shops.

Modern furniture was in non-production, price control had come in on utility furniture, and all the larger furniture shops were trying to eke out an existence with what we would call second-hand furniture, but which in some cases was antique. Price control is something I never experienced myself, but the situation was that, if at a sale there was a kitchen table, the control price of which was let us say four pounds, and there were six individuals all wanting it, they would bid until it had reached the four pounds level, when a pack of numbers or playing cards would be handed round and whoever drew the highest number had the table. Curiously there is little written evidence on price control at auctions, but this is how the auctioneers got round this very sticky point of keeping within the law. Occasionally an item was so obviously antique that it could be freely sold as antique on the open market. Price control operated on nineteenth- and twentieth-century items, and this explains why, on one occasion, rushing to a train in Banbury and passing the virtually empty windows of the Co-op shop, I saw one of the best Regency period chairs I had ever come across, clearly marked seven shillings and sixpence. I rushed in and bought it, just managing to catch my train, and did not see it again in Burford until four years later. Speaking of Banbury, it was in the autumn of 1940 when, cycling out to Broughton Castle, I saw in a field a pile of timber and in it the gleam of gold. I fell into the ditch, climbed through the hedge and there, in front of a heap of ancient wood, was a large gilt carved oak Gothic corbel bracket of a bishop. I continued my journey to Broughton Castle, where Lord Saye & Sele was granting us permission to store goods in premises there. On my return I rang up the firm who, I was told, were clearing stores that had been commandeered for army use. All the junk, the accumulation of the past hundred

years, had been carted out into this field with a view to its destruction. Somehow I prevailed on them to allow me to buy any timber I wanted for five pounds, and I can remember, with a companion going back through complete blackout, eventually finding this heavy lump of oak, tying it onto a bicycle and slowly pushing it back into Banbury. Again, I did not meet up with it for the next five years, when mistakenly I sold it. I still regret the impossibility of my moving long lengths of oak with painted inscriptions, evidently the front of a church gallery, which were on that pile of timber. Apparently all of it had come from a church in the Banbury area during an early Victorian restoration. How many similar events must have occurred with so much destroyed?

My journeys in connection with evacuation took me to such varied spots as Taunton, where I couldn't resist looking in an antique shop and buying a late Gothic church bench for four pounds. Next, I see, I was in London, and then Kidderminster, Leominster, Banbury and Birmingham. Everywhere I went I could not resist buying inexpensive trifles, even though I had no immediate practical use or outlet for them.

Early in 1941, I had settled down at an office desk in Friends House, Euston Road, London. Roger C Wilson in his book, *Quaker Relief 1940-48* includes the words:

Roger Warner was by profession an antique dealer who developed an extraordinary capacity to locate supplies needed for relief work. He had himself taken part in the Luton Scheme and only became a supplies specialist several months later, in April 1941.

It is now hard to realise just how much was happening in the autumn of 1940 when for a short while I was based in Birmingham - a city I did not know, but found easier to find my way round in the blackout than in daylight. Communication, particularly with London, was difficult and uncertain. I had to spend half a day in Coventry between the two Blitzes and was involved with the setting up of evacuation hostels. The three elderly Sturge sisters, who lived in Selly Oak, were anxious to help in any way possible and, hearing I was looking for furniture for hostel use, said they owned a cottage near the Lickey Hills, and giving me the key, said I might take anything I wanted. Next morning around 9.00am, I reached the cottage in a car I had been lent to find it one of a row and rather to my surprise an empty milk bottle on the door step and a cat waiting outside. Unlocking the door and keeping the cat out, I found myself in a completely dark passage stumbling into a chest. At that moment a guttural Germanic voice said 'If you move I kill you'. I froze, lights came on and I found myself staring into the face of a man who proved to be an eminent refugee German professor who had just come in after night's work at Birmingham University, and to whom the Misses Sturge had quite forgotten they had lent the cottage. He was sure I was the Gestapo and I was sure that he was a German spy...

Many years later and in my home area I was told to go to a cottage - one of a row - and remove the table and dining chairs, and that I would find the key under the mat outside the door. Sure enough I found it, but was a little surprised to find coats and other items still in the passageway and when opening the front room door, to find breakfast remains still on the table. Just as I was about to start clearing it so as to get the table, the owners came back and I found I was in the wrong cottage! There was a key under every mat.

Between May and December 1941 some thirty two hostels, primarily for elderly people (not covered by existing plans) were opened in various parts of the country. It is surprising what good experience the antique trade had given me for tracking down supplies, with my contacts of every kind over such a wide area. Then the evacuation hostels were closed down steadily and their contents were taken by road-rail containers back to Haddo House, near Parliament Hill Fields in London, which had become my headquarters. Walking along Euston Road, I would pass the windows of Messrs Simmons' second-hand/antique shop on the corner of Gower Street, failing to restrain myself from buying an 1850 wax doll for twenty five shillings, but also on one occasion, two hundred and fifty chamber pots for hostel use. Financing for my buying at this time was entirely, I think, in the form of very small loans from my mother, but certain opportunities did occur over the next three or four years, culminating in 1944. I was living in a hostel on the edge of Parliament Hill Fields when a very elderly neighbour died. He was General Tyler, whose grandmother had been brought up at White Lodge, Windsor as an illegitimate daughter of the Prince Regent. After his death we were forced to feed his cat and take in his post, until one day there were signs of the house again being occupied. I remember taking in a handful of letters, to discover that General Tyler's great nephew and wife had been given forty-eight hours leave from Germany, and they had come to sort and empty the house. We were in the front room, and they said, 'What will we do with everything? Just look at it, isn't it awful?', pointing to what I considered a rather wonderful conversation piece of General Tyler's grandmother surrounded by children. I said, 'But I like it, I'll give you fifteen pounds'. 'You won't!' they said, 'You must be mad; come back tonight' and so I left and went off to Westminster for a committee on Government relief supplies for Europe. Calling back that evening at 9pm, I was led round this old established London house. There was nothing very important in it, but a lot that was of interest. Next morning, before returning to work, I sent a telegram to my mother enquiring if she could provide me with a loan of five hundred pounds. I wasn't able to get back to the Tyler's till about ten o'clock that night, when I found them in a slightly high state, as they had not eaten, but had discovered old uncle's wine cellar. They were sorting in the attic. There was a raid on, and the only lighting was two hurricane lamps. Every time a 'zump' came from a bomb, they would shout, 'Ooh, look! another handkerchief belonging to Prinny', and over a shoulder would go a royal relic, amongst which was a small slice of Queen Victoria's wedding cake, and invitations to her coronation and her wedding. I wasn't sure if all these were being thrown away or whether they were whooping with delight at what they were discovering.

It was a noisy, but friendly evening, and I said to them; 'Look, you don't know what you are going to do with everything in this house. Why don't you sell it to me as a lot and I will undertake, given a few weeks, to clear and clean the house'. They said that would be completely wonderful, as there were only a handful of things they wanted and they had to get away by four o'clock the following afternoon. But it was not for them to make the decision. So they asked me to return at one o'clock the following day. At one o'clock the next day, I arrived and was led into the front room. A fire had been lit, and sitting with his back to the window was a tiny, very old man, who was introduced as the family solicitor. He waved me to sit opposite him, and the Tylers withdrew. We sat in



28. Made up 'antique' chair created from old and new furniture parts, c1850.



29. Two round-topped tables, one with claw made from a found branch and the other with tripod base of cast iron, nineteenth century.

complete silence for a moment or two when he suddenly said, 'This is most unusual; do you make a habit of buying a house-full of things like this?' 'No I don't', I replied. 'It's most unusual', he said. 'Do you like the things you are buying?' I told him that I thought there were a lot of very interesting things and I might be able to help by clearing the house, and he said 'I understand you are a Quaker'. When I said that I was, he said, 'Well, I trust the Quakers. You may have the lot. Good day to you!'. I handed over a cheque, and saw neither him nor the Tylers ever again.

In June 1941, ready for a holiday, I joined my mother, who had found accommodation for us in a remote pub near Kirkby Stephen, Westmorland, a small town I had once visited and bought a wardrobe from the then furniture shop in the town. Calling on Mr Taylor-Barker again, we discovered he had just been landed with garages-full of old oak which had been cleared from premises taken over by the Army. For some fifty pounds, a deal was struck for me to buy it as a lot. I am not now certain how it got south, probably in a road-rail container, and on its arrival in Burford my part-time furniture repairer stored it away in my already packed showroom. Amongst the items purchased, were two huge court cupboards, one double sided, dated 1745, numerous items of oak panelling, oak panelled doors, chests, bed posts and a host of other oak fragments. All these had come from an estate where the owner had once decided that he wished to panel his library, and to do so he collected from his farms and cottages all the oak timber that he could lay his hands on. The scheme had never been put into operation, and now in my own premises it was to lie for a further five years before I could get to it. How many such events must have been taking place around this time?

There is now little recollection of how difficult things were during the war for everyone concerned, and the following letters are of interest. In July 1972 that Mr Neale Jnr, the grandson of old Edward Neale of Preston, kindly lent me a tin box containing papers covering the firm during his grandfather's period. Unfortunately, most of the original stock books had been destroyed by this time, but he indicated to me that the prices in the stock books would not have been of a great help as they might not in all cases be very reliable. Among the papers were letters from Carresforth of Blackburn, (whom I had known when he had a shop in Bristol), sending payment for chairs and a sideboard. Those letters dating from the late 1930s gave a good indication of trading conditions in the London area before and during the start of the war. Apparently Neale was in this period sending goods on a sale or return basis to a certain Harry Armstrong of Kings Road, Chelsea. The letters list items returned to him as unsold, including such things as a circular breakfast table at twelve pounds ten, papier maché coasters at ten shillings and a mahogany banjo clock, nineteen pounds.

In December 1937 Armstrong wrote:

Business here is very nearly at a standstill and everyone is complaining, so I think we will just have to be patient.

A further letter from Armstrong 12 March 1938:

How is business? It is rough here, no one is buying anything, I suppose you have heard that Gould is dead and about Stan and Andrew.

April 1938:

Business here seems to be picking up a bit lately, have had a good week and should be sending you some money soon. Are you going up Sunday for the sale at Aylesbury, we are looking forward to seeing you.

This probably would have been the auction at Hartwell House, 26–28 April, 1938.

In november 1938 Armstrong was very concerned over ten shillings:

I have inadvertently sold China Plaque No. 509, four pounds ten. Under the impression it was four pounds to us, but find it is four pounds ten to us, I don't know if you can help a little on it. If not don't worry as it is all my own fault.

In 1939 things became bad. From Harry Armstrong.

From Harry Armstrong, June 1939 :

Very sorry not to have written before, but things in London have been in an awful state and no one has seemed to know what to do. Cecil and I are both in the AFS and have been called up for this service, and as there are certain jobs there we decided we would close the business for a time. We have no cash reserve and couldn't hold out for very long with no business. This seemed to be the best way of weathering the storm, which will be a long one I think. There are practically no dealers left in London.

But a letter of 9 August 1939 indicated that the Armstrongs were back in business:

Dear Mr Neale, we have a chance to sell the chairs if you could help the price a little. Can you do them for thirty pound? If so will send a cheque right away.

Two days later this offer was accepted at Preston:

...especially as you mention cash.

The next batch of letters are between William Lee the York dealer and Edward Neale at Preston.

July 1939:

Business here (York) is very slow, never worse in fact. Five shillings taken this week so far. Last week just fair, hope it's better with you.

Later in July, Lee was trying to rekindle business:

I know you are getting low on spindle backs etc and hope you can supply those I have mentioned to you. Do you think you have any more oddments that you would like to let me have to sell, there are a few people about now and likely to be during the next couple of months and it might be worthwhile, that is if there is no war. I have not been able to move many of your goods up to now, but I think it is only due to unsettled affairs generally and look forward to improved conditions in time.

September 1939 from Neale to Lee in York:

Re your letter of the 7th August about more risk on my goods at your place, I will accept responsibility for any damage by an act of War. I think in a week or so things will straighten themselves out and there will be a bit of trade. When you were over here and gave me the impression you had sold one or two pieces, and would send me a cheque for them when you got back, this is all I want you to do when you sell anything.

Late in September:

Business is quite off and I have been thinking of making an all round reduction of twenty five percent off my prices in the hope that it might make a bit of business.

On 7 November Neale wrote:

I cannot supply any spindle back chairs at the moment, but I can let you have a set of wavy ladder back chairs at thirty five shillings each.

I should imagine this lack of chairs was due to an inability to find anyone available for re-rushing.

Talking of re-rushing it is interesting to know that during the nineteenth century, when you had your chairs re-rushed and if the rushing trade was not too good, a few fish bones were always incorporated, ensuring that sooner or later a cat would sit on the chair, would claw the rush work and there would be a future job for you.

May 1940 from York:

Modern stuff gets dearer every sale I go to, but the ordinary antiques are very cheap, that is unless it is something very good looking.

Lee to Preston, March 1941:

I would be obliged if you would still hold the bigger of the two cheques I gave you a little longer, as some I had to come in haven't yet matured, they should arrive any day now. By the way, of all people, Treasure, the other Preston dealer, bought the service I just paid for from you in Preston, who was here at Thornton's last Friday. I enclose my cheque in payment for the green desert set No260, nine pounds.

However, in August 1942:

Herewith cheque for oak dresser and rack, reference 86, price ten pounds. This is the only item I have sold since writing you last. Hope you are all well and trade is in general. Goods are scarce round here.

The great scarcity of cash does make me realise how acceptable I was everywhere, as I always made immediate payment for purchases.

Having mentioned Edward Neale, the dealer from Preston, who was to play such a large part in my dealing career, I think it is right to give a few details about him. When I was sixteen, my uncle and myself returned from fishing in North Wales, and stopped in Preston where my uncle had business. I wandered around on my own, and saw a large blackened warehouse with the faded word 'Antiques'. Approaching, I found it to be an old cotton warehouse now devoted to an antique store. The premises around had all been demolished, so it stood on an isolated site where the university now stands. To reach the door one crossed what appeared to be a drawbridge and, to the left of the door, was a small window in which I saw a shadow frame with a wax figure inside, I think of John Wesley. I pushed the door, there was a loud clang from a bell. From the office on the left hand side appeared a figure, five feet tall, red faced, with a bowler hat on the back of his head, who said to me, 'Young man, what do you want?' I said, 'How much is the figure in the window?' to get the reply, 'Five pounds'. I rather weakly said, 'Oh dear!' and he said, 'What do you mean?' 'It's more than I've got', I said. 'Well' he replied, 'I have just paid four pounds for it, but you can have it for thirty shillings'. When I asked why, he replied, 'If you are brave enough to come in here you will be a good customer one day'; and, over the years ahead, I spent thousands and thousands of pounds with him.

It must have been over a long period that Teddy Neale, as he was known to everyone, told me his life story. Sometime around 1900 he had started as a pot boy at a country pub somewhere outside Liverpool. Sometimes the customers would bring in mugs and jugs with interesting decoration on them, and, perhaps not having enough to pay for the extra pint, would want to sell them. He would buy these and slowly accumulated quite a collection. The years went by, he wanted to get married, had no money and decided he would have to sell his collection of pottery. News of this reached a collector in Liverpool, who, travelling out by train one day, was met by Neale at the station in a horse and trap, taken to the pub and shown the collection. Asking the price, he was told, 'Fifty pounds the lot'. He laughed, promptly offered twenty, and negotiations started. Lunch was then served, and when offers had reached thirty pounds, with Neale still saying that he wanted fifty, it was time to get in the trap again, arguing all the time and continuing to do so on to the platform until the train came round the bend. At this, the buyer said, 'Damn you, here's your fifty pounds', but Neale replied, 'Sir, if it's taken you so long to make up your mind I'd rather keep them'.

The following week he packed up his pots, collected his wife, and off they went to Preston, renting a back-to-back house. He filled the window with the china which sold very rapidly and for more than fifty pounds; and he wondered what to do next. He put a notice up, 'I Buy Anything', and was offered an old mangle for a shilling. Putting it on the pavement, he marked it at one shilling and sixpence. It sold, and that was the beginning of one of the great antique businesses.

Some little time later there was a small auction sale in Preston. Neale went, bid and bought Lot 1, bought Lot 2, bought Lot 3, and at the end bought everything in the house. From then on he was looked on as the chief power in the second-hand-cum-antiques trade in the town. I don't know the exact date when he took a partner, an Irishman called O'Boyle, but I can remember Neale telling me that when O'Boyle died,

‘...the shackles fell from my wrists and I was a free man and never looked back’.

Around 1900, Lancashire and industrial Yorkshire were filled with ladder-back and spindle-back rush seat chairs. Neale and O’Boyle decided they would start buying them, I think initially at one farthing each, the price slowly rising to a halfpenny and then a penny. By this time the thousands of chairs they had accumulated were in some instances starting to get worm, they would throw these out into the Saturday market, only to find on the Monday they were buying them back at twice what they had sold them for. The price of chairs slowly rose from twopence each to threepence - remember these were without their rushing in most cases - and the stock went on and on accumulating in the cellar basements of the old cotton warehouse where I had first met Neale. It was I believe about 1916, when surprisingly perhaps, during the First World War a certain furniture shortage started, that a telegram reached Neale. It came from Amyas Phillips of Hitchin, asking him to quote a price for a dozen sets of six chairs, and I can remember Neale telling me that he didn’t know what to do. ‘If I quoted too high a price he wouldn’t buy them, and if I quoted too low a one, I’d set a market figure; so I sat and sat and thought, and then I sent him a telegram; and I sat and sat until a telegram came back saying he would buy’. That was the launch of rush seat spindle-back and ladder-back chairs on to a market that had never really been interested in them before.

When I started dealing in 1936, one of my regular items of stock were sets of these chairs. Neale and I had set a formula of A, B and C as to grades, and I knew the different styles and types of chairs and what to call them. I would send him a telegram, ‘Two sets of wavy ladder backs B’, and, the following morning, by passenger train and delivery lorry, would arrive six wavy ladder-back chairs, B quality, which cost me delivered seven pounds ten. These I would probably sell the following week for twelve pounds ten - or possibly fourteen pounds - to private buyers.

Ladies’ easy chairs, which were really the nursing chairs of the day, then cost fifteen shillings each, re-rushed and in clean and polished condition. The stock seemed unlimited, but by 1946 Neale told me that an American dealer came in, asking how many he had. Being told that there was an estimated five thousand in a certain cellar, a deal was struck. After seven thousand chairs had been carried out Neale decided the buyer had his money’s worth, and the same process was repeated. Another overseas buyer asked how many chairs Neale thought he might have, and on being told that he thought there were five thousand remaining, bought them, and then there were none left. Possibly the last time I saw Edward Neale alone, he was rubbing his hands in glee as a set of six such chairs were carried into the shop. ‘I’ve got some chairs again, but do you know what they cost me, two hundred pounds!’ In 1995 I was offered a set of eight somewhat similar chairs, but inferior quality, for a figure of two thousand five hundred pounds.

I found that the better quality, yew wood, saucer arm chair had a fairly ready sale in Burford, the Bay Tree Hotel over a period buying no less than twenty from me. Most visits to Edward Neale would involve the purchase of several of these. This, however, was not always possible. First old Mr Neale had to be there in person, and then, finding at least two helpers, we would proceed half-way down stairs to the cellars

where, in almost complete darkness, one or more men would be involved with rush seating. On the half landing some eight feet up were doors giving access to what is best described as cupboard space, from which with the aid of a ladder the chairs would be lifted down and, as they came out, sorted into three piles, depending on their 'quality'. This was really a matter of their colour and the quality of the varnishing. I generally purchased grade 'B' chairs at a cost of four pounds ten shillings each, but would fall for a few of the most spectacular 'A' category, costing seven pounds ten shillings. I imagine no-one had any real idea just how many chairs were stacked away in that space, but I have the impression that Mr Neale loved those chairs, and was aware that he would never be able to replace them. According to Edward Neale - and he was reliable with his facts - all the best chairs came from the Brierfield area of Lancashire, not far from Nelson. All the best ones had originally been given as prizes at flower shows, just as copper kettles had been during the Victorian period. What I am now uncertain about is whether the Brierfield area was where the better chairs had been manufactured, because it certainly had been an area for chair workshops, or whether that is just where he had always been able to find most.

It was over a long period that Neale told me some of the workings of his business. He had three sons, and each Monday morning they would have a family conference, to arrange who would stay in the shop and which area the other three of them would cover. The normal formula was to think of an item that was not in demand, think of its normal going price, and decide that they would buy as many as they possibly could for a figure some one third under the going rate. By doing this they built up an enormous stock, say of sofas or drop leaf tables, but in due course they denuded the market both in Scotland and the north of England, which was the area that they all worked. As the price began to rise, slowly they would start to bring out their stock, and thereby reap a handsome profit.

Neale was nothing if not a working dealer; he could sign his name but was only semi-literate. He was, I know, a key figure in the northern knockout ring settlement at auction sales, something I never myself took part in, but somehow we had a very friendly working relationship. I can remember my first visit to him after the war in 1946, when he asked me where I was going afterwards. I said: 'Home, I haven't got enough petrol to go further'. He said: 'Oh petrol, where's your car, give me the keys? I'll tell you what you'll do when you leave me. Go up north, go into Cumbria, I haven't been there for sometime'. He told me of three dealers whom I had never visited round the Cumbrian coastline, but I said: 'I haven't got enough petrol for it'. He said: 'Oh petrol! last week we were fined five hundred pounds for black market stuff. I'm just filling your car up, you'll have plenty to get up there and get home', and this I did. I knew the firm through three generations. He had three sons. Sadly all had died following accidents before Neale himself, and then the business fell onto the shoulders of his grandson. He had to empty and move the stock to new smarter premises before demolition of the cotton factory site and erection of university buildings, and it was during this great sort out I was able to buy many items never before on offer.

I suppose every auction sale of interest that I attended was also attended by Edward Neale in person. We were to a considerable extent on different sides of the fence, as

was his greatest friend and rival, Frederick Treasure of the Treasure House, Preston, whose business I imagine started around 1920. Frederick Treasure was every inch a ladies' man. He was immaculate as a person, always had a button hole, and to all intents and purposes he was a rival of Neale, who sadly only lived a few months after the death of Frederick Treasure. The Treasure House was arranged not as a warehouse as Edward Neale's shop was, but in a series of furnished rooms, and I can remember in the early 1930s going there with my mother to choose an oak bureau bookcase which I had been given as an eighteenth birthday present, one of many dozens available at a flat rate of ten pounds each.