

GOING ONCE, GOING TWICE

SUE CADE finds out just what it is that has kept Honiton auctioneer Duncan Chilcott at the forefront of the exciting world of selling antiques and collectibles

"I ALWAYS liked the world of auctioneering," Duncan tells me over drinks with wife Liz at the Vine Inn, Honiton. "My grandmother took me to auctions when I was very young. Perhaps that's when I caught the bug."

Duncan grew up in Surrey and was unsure what direction to take until he took off to London for the Queen's Jubilee celebrations in 1977. Alighting in Piccadilly Circus, he cheekily wandered into Christie's. "I was overawed by the impressive steps, red carpets, uniformed doorman and the rare Japanese Netsuke carvings on display. It was a Eureka moment and I knew I belonged there. I marched up to reception and asked to see the personnel manager. Fortune was smiling that day as someone was leaving – I was told I could start on Monday."

Duncan progressed well at Christies until an unreliable motorbike stopped him in his tracks. "The darned bike was forever breaking down meaning I frequently missed my train into London. It became apparent that I was facing the sack – so I got in first and resigned."

After a stint selling second-hand white goods for Phillips Auction House in Morley, South Yorkshire, Duncan moved back to London to join the firm's Collectors Department, just as a new wave of collectibles including Dinky, Corgi, train sets and dolls became popular along with

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some very peculiar items. "I had to catalogue a collection of stuffed birds. The near-blind owner had been sold 'strop-ups', where the head of one bird is attached to the body of another. Bizarrely, these sold like hot cakes to interior decorators." Duncan also valued the contents of the Long Room at Lords, including the Ashes. "I had no idea how to put a price on them, so I put my finger in the air and estimated one million pounds. Nowadays they're insured for an undisclosed sum – I wouldn't like to hazard a guess."

Fame beckoned with a call from the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*, on the hunt for new blood. Duncan joined the team of the popular TV show, travelling around the UK valuing items brought by a public hungry for a windfall. He also earned



Picture by Terry Ite

Duncan Chilcott is celebrating ten years at Chilcotts of Honiton

DUNCAN'S MOST EXCITING FIND

One of Duncan's favourite *Antiques Roadshow* finds was when an elderly gentleman brought a pre-war Marklin '0' gauge train, boxed, unused and in pristine condition to be valued. The man had been billeted in Berlin just after WW2. The family he was staying with had nothing so he gave them food and drink and they 'paid' him with trains. His idea was to give the trains to the male children he hoped he would have, but in the end, he had girls who weren't interested in the trains. When his grandchildren were all girls too, he decided to sell the trains. He brought a single train to the roadshow but had an amazing collection of similar locomotives and tenders at home. The total sale value was £43,000 – enough for him to buy his council house..

a further 15 minutes of fame with guest appearances on *Blue Peter* alongside presenters Simon Groom, Peter Duncan and Janet Ellis (who he has a crush on still, much to the amusement of Liz). "I helped the programme with the Christmas appeals – and yes, I have my own *Blue Peter* badge and even popped up in a *Blue Peter* Annual!"

Duncan was then invited to head up Bonhams West Country.

So what was it that prompted Duncan's decision to set up his own auction house? "I was travelling too much. I missed the action of the auction room and spending time with my family – by then we had three children. Liz and I decided the time was right, and in 2005, Chilcotts of Honiton was born."

I'm eager to find out what exciting treasures Duncan has uncovered himself. "Where to start? We were doing a house clearance in Tiverton, when an ornament was discovered at the back of the drawer. The family hadn't liked it so they had hidden it away. But what they'd jammed in the drawer was, in fact, a jade lion – which we ended up selling for £19,000."

Life for the Chilcotts in Devon will always be an adventure with new treasures to be found – not only antiques and art, but also the countryside, which Duncan, Liz and their children love to enjoy as avid walkers and cyclists. ♦