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INTRODUCTION

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Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be an antiques dealer.

This life has given me everything, and not just monetarily. That helps of course, but what I really mean is the opportunities and experiences it's provided for me. For instance, sitting on a hill in Italy with the sun on my face, jeans filthy from crawling around some attic, surrounded by things I've just bought, things I love and understand. It's the friends I've made, the knowledge acquired. It's rescuing a long-lost item, not for the glory or the money, but for the sheer unadulterated joy of sharing it with other people.

It's the pleasure I get from reading. The fact that a bit of information left on a page by someone from way back when can open up a whole new world amazes me. The moment it dawns on you that all styles, all genres from all ages, are linked, that you don't get one without the other, the world becomes a

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bigger place. Understanding this, and therefore better understanding yourself and your work, is what makes you go up another level. And it doesn't stop. There is always something more to learn, and your knowledge and insight will always be enhanced by what you read.

It's an appreciation of the things we find, things made by people – call it art, or call it craftsmanship. It's what these things say to us that's so important. If you can convey the same sense of excitement you felt when you first found a piece, pass it on to someone else by the way it's positioned in a showroom, the way it's photographed or the way it's described in a listing, and sell the item that's so inspired you, that's the key to opening the world. But like all wonders, they're hard won, and the journey might sometimes feel like purgatory. That's just the way it is. But the way a table adorned with a lamp and a photograph can affect a room, a mood and possibly a life, is inspirational. It's magic, the reason we do what we do. I don't really understand it, or even want to – I just love being a part of it, creating something and seeing the magic happen.

This is an entire life if you want it. It feels like a gift, and I cherish every single moment. It's not something you throw away when you're finished. It's

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not an enchantment or fad. And it's so much more than just dead people's stuff. It's rich and layered. It's artistic and keeps you grounded. It's joyful and cold-hearted. It's jealous and bewitching in equal measure. Above all else it's enriching: you will learn something new every day, good or bad, and you'll gain something from every situation you encounter. It has changed everything for me and continues to do so yearly, daily, hourly – it's all I've ever wanted to do.

When it comes down to it, it's all about taste. I can't teach you that – you're born with it or you're not. The 'eye' cannot be taught. Sorry, but that's the truth. The rest can, and, in some small part, that's what I hope we can achieve here. Just now I said there is no manual to teach you how to be an antiques dealer, but I hope this book will help you if you want to get started in this business. With that said, I want to make something clear: what you're about to read is just the basics, and it's not some hard and fast set of dos and don'ts; it's not me telling you this is the only way to do something – it's just my opinion. I don't have all the answers. But I have done a lot, and I've been around. I've tried it all, so I suppose it does give me some perspective to pass on.

Dealing in antiques has given me a life that continues to be unbelievably good fun. It's broken

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down imaginary barriers and created rather than broken dreams. I never want it to stop. I hope it will mean the same to you, so let's get to it, shall we?

What Exactly Is This Business?

Before we begin, before you take the plunge and leave your job or invest some money in stock, you need to fully understand what you're getting yourself into. The antiques business is tough and it takes a lifetime. For that reason it's not for the faint-hearted. Being mad keen is brilliant – enthusiasm is half the battle – but you also need to know what you're doing.

If you're just getting started, you probably don't know very much yet – don't pretend you do. People do this all the time. You'll immediately get dealers' backs up and you won't learn anything. You've got to be honest with yourself and with others. It's fine not to know very much at the beginning, because I'm going to share with you as much as I can and answer the tons of questions you might have.

It's also OK to be nervous. That's exactly how it should be – nervous is good because you're going to work seven days a week every week and travel thousands and thousands of miles. You're going to

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meet incredibly interesting people and you're going to meet some people who are not going to be as helpful or as friendly as they could be. You're going to have wonderful times, but you're going to have tough times too. The first ten or so years will be the hardest. Make it beyond those ten and you'll be well on your way to achieving what you want in this business. After that, there are no limits. You can go as far as you want. You can decide where you want to be and stay at that level or you can decide to go up, down or sideways.

But because there are no limits, you can get lost in this 'magical' world of antiques. You therefore need to figure out what you want. By that I mean you need to really think about which area of the business you want to work in. You might not end up there – it's not mandatory. Despite what you aim for and where you start out, you might end up somewhere totally different.

There are lots of different parts of the antiques business – from restorers to porters, to shippers, to photographers, to valuers, to dealers, to gallerists. I started as a restorer and then became an architectural antiques dealer, and I've ended up as a fine English furniture dealer and interior decorator supplier, with lots of other things in between. As you learn more

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and are exposed to new areas of the antiques world, you'll find other things that fascinate you that you didn't know were out there when you began. It's all part of the learning curve. It's like a stepladder effect. You start at the bottom rung, which could be fireplaces, and then that leads you on to overmantel mirrors, which leads you on to lighting, which leads you on to rugs. It's a progression, with one step leading up to the next, and you stop wherever you feel most comfortable. But there's no way of knowing where that will be at the outset. So, just start on the thing that you love, and learn as much as you can about it. That knowledge, whether it relates to design, manufacture, scale or history, might then lead you on to other things, because everything is interlocking in the antiques business.

In my experience, once you're in, you're in for life. I always call the antiques trade 'Hotel California' – you could check out if you wanted to, but most people never leave. I don't know anybody who's got into the business who has left, apart from perhaps a couple of guys who made a big noise when they first arrived then disappeared off the face of the earth, never to be heard from again. It's a hell of a life – and what a life – but you have to be in it for the long haul. Just because you've watched *Antiques*

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Roadshow for 20 years and made 50 quid selling something to your mate in the pub does not make you an antiques dealer. It's a long, long road if you want to get to the point where you can really call yourself a dealer.

The reality is 5am starts when you're still covered in muck from loading the night before. The reality is packing the van so nothing is forgotten and nothing gets broken. The reality is booking tickets for your stand at the antiques fair. It's standing in the rain for three days on end or sleeping in the back of the van. It's not being able to shower or even wash your hands. It's having no money whatsoever. It's getting ripped off or robbed. I remember one Newark fair when I had to employ a bodyguard to make sure I didn't get mugged and nobody picked the cash from my pockets that I'd worked my arse off to get in the first place.

It's also hooning down the M6 in crappy weather hoping you're going to sell something and make enough money to get back up the road – it really hits home when you have no choice but to make a sale. That's where I've been countless times, and it's brutal. In the early days, the big question was always whether the van was going to make it. There was no guarantee because it was as ropey as hell, but it was all I could

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afford. I'd be worrying all the way to Newark from North Wales, fearing a breakdown.

There is so much people don't realise, layer upon layer that you don't know about until you're in the middle of it. To be an antiques dealer is to be an artist, designer and curator. You're a photographer, a buyer, a van driver and a salesman all at the same time, and you have to be able to jump from dealing with a demolition contractor at 8.30 in the morning to lunch with a lord at 1pm before hitting the pub with a load of other dealers and not getting away before midnight. It's deals all the way, and the most natural dealers are at it when they're 11 or 12 years old. That's how it was with me. At that age I didn't know what I do now, but it just made sense, and I've been doing nothing else since.

And it has been great fun, as you'll see when I tell you about some of the experiences I've had down the years that probably shouldn't be repeated. But right now, I want to make sure you know what you're letting yourself in for. Having to make money out of it rather than just dabbling scares the hell out of some people, particularly if they've come from another job where they've been earning a decent salary. I've only ever had one job, and I never got paid very much, so for me it didn't matter. But some

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people give up careers to start this one, and that can be pretty scary.

The reality of this business is continuity. If you don't sell what you've bought, you won't have any money to carry on trading. It's like Monopoly. If you run out of money you're out of the game and that can happen very easily. You have to constantly turn money over in order to keep going. But if you've done it right, if you've bought well and the van made it, and you're at the fair all set up and ready to go and you sell your first few things, a weight is lifted. The excitement kicks in – that phenomenal rush of adrenalin. That's the moment when a dealer is made – it really is that difficult yet simple at the same time.

For the people who are good at it there's an overpowering want, a need, an all-consuming hunger to get into the business and do well. All they think about is antiques and dealing, because there is so much satisfaction and wonder to be had from a world where every item you come across has its own story and can potentially make you money.

What I want to do with this book is give you as much help as I can, but it's not the beginning or the end – it's just a guide, remember? Something to refer to so you won't be totally lost when you first start. It

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HOW NOT TO BE AN ANTIQUES DEALER

took me years to learn the basics, because when I started there was no internet and no social media where you could pick the brains of those who'd been there and done it. So think of this as a map to help navigate the initial hurdles. Once you've overcome them, the rest is what you make of it.

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**GETTING
SET UP**