

‘It is time to declutter’ declares earl

Cellars and attics at Holkham Hall are cleared out as part of ‘housework’ to allow guided tours

by Roland Arkell

For the first time in its long history, Holkham Hall in Norfolk sold selected contents from its cellars and attics at an on-the-premises auction.

Under the instruction of Thomas Edward Coke, 8th Earl of Leicester, Holkham: The Attic Sale was hosted by Essex saleroom **Sworders (25% buyer’s premium)** on February 11.

Around 400 lots from the north Norfolk estate, many of them in storage for half a century or more, totalled £401,135 – more than twice the pre-sale estimate.

More than 150 bidders in the Lady Elizabeth Wing at Holkham were joined by 1600 online registrants from across the globe. There were successful purchasers from a dozen countries, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, China, Germany, Denmark, France, Italy and the US. All but a handful of lots were sold.

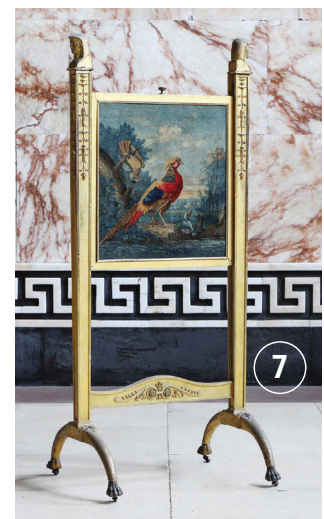
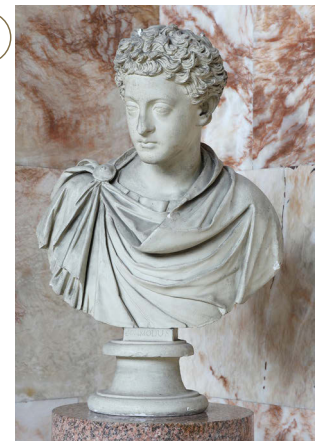
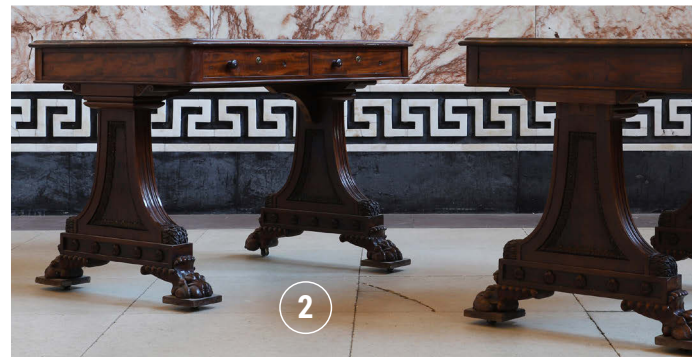
The Coke family of Norfolk traces its roots back to the Elizabethan and Jacobean jurist Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634) – author of the *Institutes of the Lawes of England* that laid the principles for the common law.

Holkham Hall itself was built by Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester (1697-1759), who as a young man in 1712 embarked on a six-year Grand Tour during which he amassed an extraordinary collection of works of art. William Kent helped to shape the estate to house these acquisitions, although the process would be a long one.

The house was built under the supervision of the Norfolk builder Matthew Brettingham the Elder between 1734-64, with work on the interiors only completed by Coke’s widow Lady Margaret Tufton, Countess of Leicester (1700-75) in 1771.

The core collection at Holkham today remains very much as originally intended. The 1st Earl’s Grand Tour acquisitions – his cache of classical marble sculptures and a library of illuminated manuscripts – were carefully documented and are still largely intact.

Instead, most of the items in Sworders’ sale were purchased for the estate by subsequent generations: the descendants of Wenman Coke (c.1717-76), MP for both Derby



Highlights from the Holkham attic sale held on the premises by Sworders on February 12.

1. Pair of 18th century Japanese Imari octagonal vases, lacking covers, 23in (58cm) high, **£11,000.**

2. Pair of William IV mahogany library tables, **£29,000.**

3. Group of Roman carved marble sarcophagus fragments, **£38,000.**

4. Italian 18th century plaster bust of Commodus, **£4800.**

5. Bow porcelain four-tiered sweetmeat

stand, c.1755, **£2000.**

6. George III mahogany Pembroke table, **£10,000.**

7. Regency giltwood fire screen in the manner of Chippendale the Younger, **£4500.**

8. Taxidermy ram’s head by Thomas Gunn of Norwich, **£1600.**

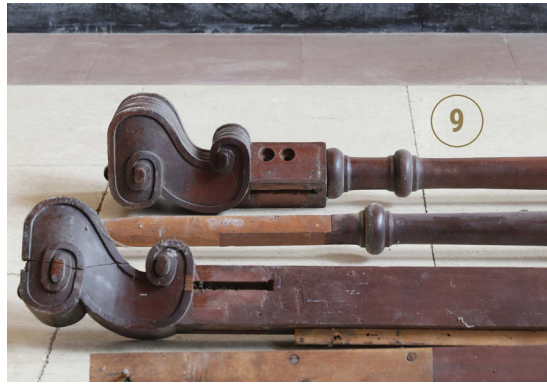
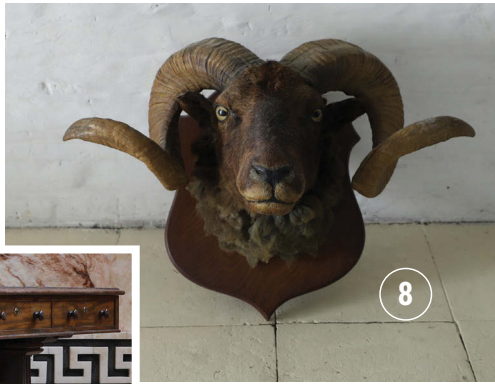
9. Group of mahogany bedposts, c.1840, **£5000.**

10. Pair of late 19th century brass twin-light ceiling lights, **£4500.**

11. Silver cup by Ridley Hayes and George Nathan, London 1904 after ancient Greek original found at Vaphio, Laconia, **£550.**

12. Silver-plated vegetable dish and cover and a plated biscuit tray by Mappin & Webb, **£800.**

13. Detail of a Republican Sèvres porcelain ‘beau bleu’ dessert service, **£46,000.**



and Norfolk, and his son, the agriculturalist Thomas William Coke (1754-1842) who sat as the Whig MP for north Norfolk for 56 years.

The current Lord Leicester, who has run the estate since 2006 and succeeded into the earldom in 2015, explained the reasons for the sale.

“Over the past few seasons, we have opened our attics and cellars to our visitors for guided tours. This has meant a great deal of ‘housework’ to make the passages and walkways safe for people to pass through. The furniture is being stacked higher and higher, so it is time to declutter.”

The idea of a sale and its make-up followed a series of recommendations made by Holkham’s collections coordinator and its art adviser.

Tourist souvenirs

A solitary lot provided a connection with the earliest years of the Holkham collection: a group of Roman carved marble fragments from the late 2nd century.

These 11 pieces, each carved in relief with mythological figures and sea creatures, originally formed part of a sarcophagus frieze panel that was bought by the 1st Earl in Rome on September 11, 1716. The account book

of Coke’s expenses on his Grand Tour suggest he purchased the fragments, together with a portrait bust of Marcus Aurelius, for 65 crowns. Estimated here at up to £20,000, they sold for £38,000.

A series of 18th and 19th century plaster busts depicting faces from classical Greece and Rome may also have been later Grand Tour purchases.

An 18th century Italian plaster bust of the Emperor Commodus (161-192AD), that was previously displayed in the Old Billiard Room at Holkham, sold at £4800 while a plaster bust of the Punic War General Marcus Claudius Marcellus indistinctly inscribed *JS April 28, 1848* sold at £1700. It is thought to have been made from a mould by Matthew Brettingham (or his son of the same name) who had travelled to Italy in 1747-54 to purchase sculptures and artwork for his British patrons.

Private quarters

Some of the items in the sale came direct from the Coke family’s private living quarters in the hall. They include furniture from the bedrooms of Lord and Lady Leicester’s four children and porcelain services from

living rooms that had been in storage since the 1970s-80s when the 7th Earl began the process of making the collection more accessible to the public.

A Republican period Sèvres dessert service was the day’s top lot, selling at £46,000 (estimate £20,000-30,000). Painted with named botanical specimens to a ‘beau bleu’ ground, it was made during the first years of the French Republic c.1800.

The earliest mention of the service in Holkham’s archives is in 1897, where it is listed as part of the 2nd Earl’s (1822-1909) collection. In addition to 39 dessert plates and a dozen ice cream cups were some of the larger serving pieces including two pairs of bottle coolers, a pair of ice pails and covers, one with a liner, four monteiths and a punchbowl. It sold to a bidder in the room.

Classic furniture

At the core of the Holkham dispersal was a large quantity of classic English country house furniture.

Pieces of obvious quality included a pair of William IV mahogany library tables with crisply carved foliate decoration and bold paw

feet, expected to sell for £4000-6000 and a George III mahogany Pembroke table with canted square section legs and a X-shaped stretcher (estimate £1500-2500). Provenance ensured they sold well above hopes at £29,000 and £10,000 respectively.

A Regency giltwood fire screen in the Egyptian revival taste that was likely made in the workshops of Thomas Chippendale the Younger hammered at £4500. Mentioned in various inventories back to the mid 19th century, this is almost certainly one of the pair illustrated in the Drawing Room and the Green State Room at Holkham in the 1909 book *English Homes*.

Other classic country house fare included a pair of 18th century Japanese Imari octagonal vases (£11,000) and an early 18th century Louis XV Gobelins mythological tapestry depicting Juno and Aeolus (£9500).

The tapestry was once on display in the North State Sitting Room at Holkham but, after the room was refurbished in 1910, was relegated to the Chapel Wing corridor where it was hidden behind another tapestry.

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Hall holds sale after a spot of ‘housework’

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It was found only in 2017 when it was sent to Belgium for cleaning.

Estate simplicity

Country house estate items came under the hammer with more modest expectations.

Bidders clamoured to buy a pair of electric-powered servants bells by Cowton & Sons of Oxford Street installed as part of the modernisation of the hall in 1910 (£700) and the head of a prize ram from the Holkham estate mounted on an oak shield by the revered Norwich taxidermist Thomas Gunn (£1600).

A muscular £4500 was bid against an estimate of £100-150 for a pair of late 19th century brass twin-light ceiling lights.

Souvenirs of royalty included a photograph of George V at a shooting party at Sandringham c.1905 (£260) and a silvered oak and blue velvet chair from the 1953 Coronation (£1600). It was used at the service by the 5th Earl of Leicester or his daughter Anne Tennant, Baroness Glenconner, who was one of Queen Elizabeth II’s Maids of Honour.

Perhaps most remarkable was the response to the sort of second division 18th and 19th century estate furniture that has become nigh on unsaleable in a different context.

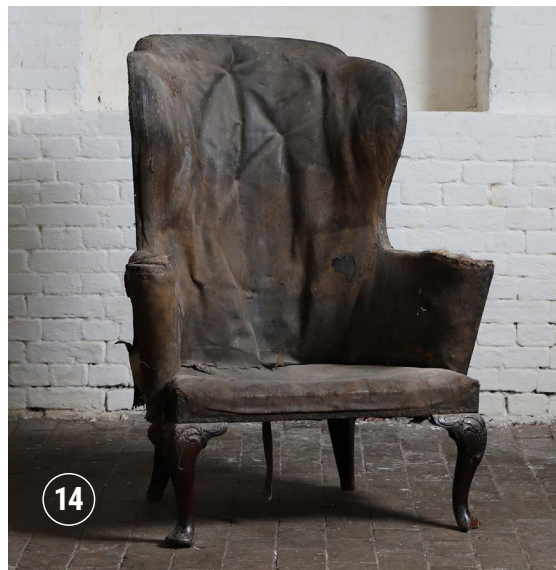
Battered Victorian sofas and Georgian chests of the type that might struggle to bring £100-200 were here selling closer to four figures.

Studio on site

The sale included several pieces made at Holkham Pottery, the once thriving local studio active on the estate from 1951-2007. Some high prices included a pair of table lamps with a simulated malachite glaze signed by Holkham Pottery’s chief potter Cyril Ruffles sold at £500 and a single lamp with a lapis lazuli glaze at £320.

The pottery was the idea of Lady Elizabeth Leicester, the wife of the 5th Earl, and was sited in 19th century buildings that had been Holkham’s laundry and a bowling alley. Today it is the Lady Elizabeth Wing events venue where the Sworders’ sale was held.

Lord Leicester now hopes to have more time in the future to nurture his interests in art and continue his



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14. George III mahogany and leather wingback armchair, worn and distressed, **£2400**

15. Late 19th century oak estate cabinet, **£3000.**

16. A 19th century oak estate-made pig bench, **£650.**

17. Lady Leicester’s deckchair with stencilled inscription, **£240.**

18. Victorian iron and woven wicker bath chair, **£350.**

19. Pair of Edwardian electric estate bells by Cowtan & Sons, **£700.**

20. Holkham Pottery table lamp by Cyril Ruffles, **£320.**

21. Regency toleware lantern hood, **£1500.**

father’s initiatives, including a display in the Hall about Magna Carta and the role played by his ancestor Sir Edward Coke in preserving its values.

“I undertook this exercise with mixed feelings,” he said. “I am, like

some of my ancestors, something of a ‘hoarder’, though equally it is wonderfully cathartic to be able to say goodbye.”

Lord Leicester hopes buyers “will see these with a fresh pair of eyes and

give them a new lease of life”.

He took the decision to work with Sworders of Stansted Mountfitchet, which held the Guinness family sale at Elveden for Lord Iveagh in September 2023. ■