



# Picture perfect

The contents of Boden Hall, Cheshire, combined curiosities such as a display case for cotton-manufacturing samples and pottery teapots with outstanding paintings by Sir John Lavery and Harold Harvey

**S**UCH was my addiction to buying second-hand reference books that a friend used to claim he once had to prevent me from spending all our beer money on a hefty volume called *Who's Who in Nuclear Physics, 1953*. Perhaps it was true. Recently, I felt a twitch of the old passion on discovering *Dictionary of Old Occupations*, an e-book compiled by Jane Hewitt, a genealogical researcher ([www.familyresearcher.co.uk](http://www.familyresearcher.co.uk)).

I came upon it thanks to a coincidence. Last week, I mentioned that Bink Fine Art of Cheltenham, an exhibitor at the Cotswolds dealers' fair in Chelsea, London SW3, had a number of fabric designs made by Graham Sutherland for Horrockses, Crewdson & Co of Manchester. Then, in the catalogue of a contents sale held at the beginning of the month by Sworders of Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex, I discovered a glazed display case made up for the same company to illustrate processes from raw to yarn during the manufacturing of cotton (*Fig 3*). The samples are labelled and naturally such terms as 'finisher scutcher lap' and 'slubbing sliver' piqued my curiosity. From Mrs Hewitt's work, I learn that a scutcher was both a textile worker and the beater he used to separate useful fibres from woody flax, whereas a slubber separated slivers of fibre by carding to prepare them for weaving. The company was formed by merger in 1887, so the display must post-date that; it sold for £275.

Whatever the hard work, contents auctions are among the most enjoyable occasions in an auctioneer's life and Sworders certainly enjoyed themselves with the on-site Holkham attic sale in February (*Art Market, February 26*) and again with the principal contents of Boden Hall, Cheshire, this time removed to the auction house in Stansted Mountfitchet. For all the generic likeness, the two collections were very different. Holkham was the stately detritus from a house in the ownership of the same family since it was built; Boden a modern assemblage formed by a couple with taste and enthusiasm. In his catalogue introduction, Tim Wonnacott wrote that William and Victoria Wrather had been 'so meticulous and careful in their choice of objects to create the nigh-perfect interiors at Boden', which they bought in 1996. Within the assemblage, there were actual collections, his of steam engines and automobilia, hers of pottery teapots. He also collected cars, bicycles, tricycles and penny-farthings. →



*Fig 1: Oak pier table with paw feet, about 1820, by Robert Strahan of Dublin. £4,750*



*Fig 2: Housekeeper's chest, centred on a longcase movement. £7,750*



*Fig 3 right: Glazed case displaying the processes in manufacturing cotton, from raw wool to yarn. £275*



**Fig 4: *La Belle Mère* by Sir John Lavery, of Hazel and Eileen Lavery. £450,000**

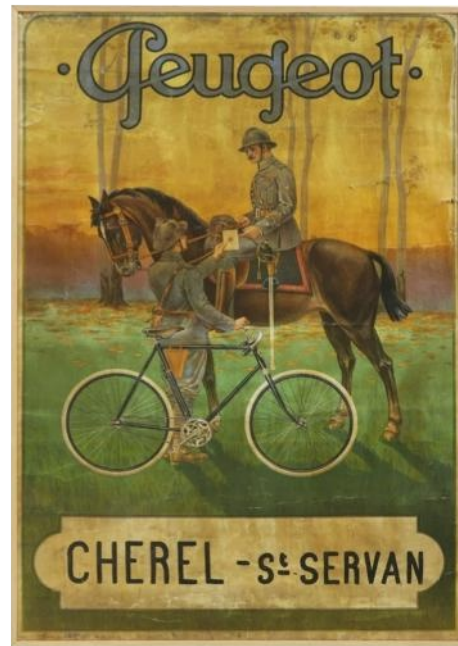
Unlike that at Holkham, this sale will have provided little work for the restorers. One exception was the most expensive piece of furniture, an early-19th-century grained oak housekeeper's cupboard centred by what was, effectively, a longcase clock (**Fig 2**). It was signed by Edward Glase of Bridgnorth, Shropshire, who was working there between 1770 and 1807. The admirable condition report by Sworders tells us that there is 'wear to the door edges, corners of the cabinet, drawers and marks from years of use, in farmhouse condition, one end moulding is missing'. It stood about 8ft 9in and it sold for £7,750.

The house dates from 1825 and, as it was near empty when they bought it, Mrs Wrather was able to devote her skills as the owner of a textile and decorating business—thus the display case of cotton pieces, no doubt—to furnish it appropriately. One interesting piece was an oak pier table (**Fig 1**) by Robert Strahan of Dublin, the leading Irish cabinetmaker (and auctioneer and undertaker) of the 19th century. Strahan was established in 1776 and remained in the family until 1969. Although catalogued as about 1820, a note says 'age indeterminate', perhaps because the trade label appears to have Queen Victoria's arms. In any event, the unusual bowed legs and paw feet helped take it well above estimate to £4,750.



**Fig 5 above: *Morning Sunshine* by Harold Harvey. £113,750. Fig 6 right: Poster for Peugeot bicycles, from about 1908. £875**

There was one outstanding painting, a double portrait (**Fig 4**) by Sir John Lavery (1856–1941), which made £450,000. The title of the 50½in by 35½in canvas was *La Belle Mère*, an unusually imprecise term in French, as it can signify either mother-in-law or stepmother, the latter being the case here. Two of Lavery's favourite models were his daughter Eileen and his second wife, Hazel, her stepmother. Notable likenesses of Eileen show her posed with a boar-spear for pig sticking at Tangier in Morocco. He painted at least 400 studies and portraits of Hazel, one of the great beauties of the day, including one that became the face of the Irish Free State on its new banknotes and survived as a watermark until the Irish punt gave way to the euro in 2002. Unsurprisingly, that is a much less animated image than this double portrait, which shows, in Kenneth McConkey's words, the 'active paint surface, which gives Lavery's style its immediacy'.



Prof McConkey is the authority on British Impressionism and he was also consulted on a fine example of the work of Harold Harvey (1874–1941), which reached a more than thrice-estimate £113,750. The 37¾in by 30in *Morning Sunshine* (**Fig 5**) shows two pretty Cornish girls carrying in the aired washing. It was noticed very favourably at the Royal Academy in 1911.

William Wrather (1939–2023) was a collector in his business, as well as his home life. He was a commercial agent who 'built a significant portfolio of refurbished period office buildings, principally in Manchester city centre', but also retail parks, industrial estates and shopping centres further afield. His cars and bicycles have mostly remained with the family, but there was a wealth of associated memorabilia on offer. A poster advertising Peugeot bicycles (**Fig 6**) dating from about 1908 sold for £875. 🐉

**Next week Travellers' tales**

## Pick of the week

Introducing her collection of novelty pottery teapots, Victoria Wrather noted that tea has been the beverage of her life 'a natural progression has been for me to become interested in teapots themselves, particularly if they are novel in their design'. At one time, she had more than 400, of which about 350 were in the sale. A lot of four 'Belisha' pots modelled as field guns by Clews & Co of Stoke-on-Trent sold for £400



Presumably, they were named for Leslie Hore-Belisha, who as Minister of Transport introduced driving tests and Belisha beacons on zebra crossings. In 1937, Amberlain appointed him a cost-cutting Secretary of War, but the Munich crisis converted him to armament and he secured funds to re-equip the navy. He was dismissed in 1940, so this would be a date for the pots.