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Posh in the attic



A collection of treasures from Holkham Hall is going under the hammer. *Eleanor Doughty* looks at the heirlooms you could get your hands on

Most of us contemplating an attic sale might have only Christmas decorations, an old bike and a box of dog-eared books to offer. But Holkham Hall in Norfolk, the country seat of the Earl of Leicester and one of Britain's biggest houses, has 406 lots of stuff, unused for generations, to auction off when it holds its first contents sale on Tuesday.

"I'm looking forward to having a good clear-out," says Holkham's owner, Thomas Coke, 8th Earl of Leicester. The Cokes, who were made Earls of Leicester in 1837, have been at Holkham since 1609, and a fair amount of valuables have accumulated in that time. The attics and cellars at the big house, which was completed in 1764, were stuffed with unused porcelain, pictures and furniture.

The auction catalogue includes a deckchair stencilled with "Lady Leicester" (approximately £100 to £150), a four-tier sweetmeat stand (£1,000-£2,000), and a Sevres dessert service (£20,000-£30,000). Very few of the lots have been taken from the family's private apartments or from the state rooms. "The attic sale comprises things we have used but have been in the cellar and attics for decades," Coke, 59, says.

He isn't very attached to any of it, but admits that he will "mildly" miss the Etruscan head (£1,500-£2,000) that has been in his office for a while. "I am a

sentimental, home-loving Cancerian. There are a number of things in there – an Elizabeth II coronation chair (£300-£500) and some green leather chairs that I remember sitting on at dinners, but we've got other chairs that are better."

Edward Coke, 7th Earl of Leicester, established a curatorial team in the 1970s and his son has built on this legacy in recent years.

The head curator went through the attics and cellars, made a long list and then the earl and his wife picked each item for sale.

"It's always been in the back of my mind. We had a lot of things in the way – a lot of furniture and artefacts. It was time to have a declutter," he says.

The difference between this and other sales held at country houses in years gone by is that this one is not being forced by taxation. "We're not desperate for the money," the earl says. The earnings will go towards "the restoration of existing works or the purchase of new pieces".

His father, who died in 2015, would have been "totally supportive" of this venture, he says, since "he took part in a couple of stately car boot sales himself".

He is referring to the Codex Leicester controversy. This illustrated collection of scientific writings by Leonardo da Vinci was named after the 1st Earl of Leicester. It was sold in 1980 to pay tax owed after the death of Tommy Coke, 5th Earl of Leicester. The arts minister at the time, Norman St John-Stevas, had wanted to keep the Leonardo in the country, so he requested a meeting with Eddie, then Viscount Coke, to complain that Holkham had not consulted the government before putting it up for sale.

"Only the political elite [would do that]," he grumbles. Is he, as a Conservative peer, a member of the political elite? "No, I'm not. Not with a Labour administration that wants to get rid of hereditary peers from the House of Lords just to improve their political chances through

Lord Leicester with some of the antiques from Holkham Hall (inset). Top right: the Sevres dessert service, estimated at £20,000-£30,000. Right: a bust of Marcus Claudius Marcellus (£1,500-£2,500)



gerrymandering. I'm a contrarian. The elites have changed."

Elected to the House of Lords in 2021, four years and as many prime ministers later, he is unimpressed by forthcoming reforms that will have the last 92 hereditary peers (including him) expelled from the Lords. He says the hereditaries provide "a check and balance on prime ministerial patronage. Once [we're] gone, the only people going in there will be at the behest of the prime minister." He didn't stand for election for the glory, or for "some pecuniary or personal advantage", but "out of a sense of duty. I speak my mind, and I voted against my party when they were in government three times. My allegiance is to the country." He stops mid-flow.

"That sounds a bit trite. It should be God, King and country, in that order."

People like him – peers with great estates – should put their heads above the parapet more, he says. "With great privilege comes responsibility, and being responsible for the governance of the country." He describes how sometimes in the Lords chamber people invite individual peers to speak, calling out,

"Leicester, Leicester, Leicester" because they want to hear your experience. [In] getting rid of 90 hereditary peers on the basis that it's an outdated concept, you're going to get rid of a whole load of private-sector experience."

If he is disgruntled about Lords reform, he is absolutely outraged about the changes to inheritance tax announced in October's budget, which will result in reductions to business property relief and agricultural property relief (APR) – he is not just a landowner but a farmer too.

"APR was brought in to protect the assets in a family business, which allow you to have a business or farms that doesn't make a great deal of money. It allows you to perpetuate passing it down through the generations. The fact that Labour said that it's only going to affect about 500 [farms]... their figures are so completely wrong, but they don't care."

He doesn't think his attic sale, on the other hand, will have any impact on how people perceive Holkham. "I get so many [nice] letters from people," he says. Although he may no longer be a member of the elite, he hopes Holkham still holds enough cachet to shift a few pieces in the sale. "I think there's probably [still] a snobbishness out there that people will want to say, 'This is from Holkham.'"

Holkham | The Attic Sale is at Holkham Hall, Norfolk, on Tuesday from 10am and online at sworder.co.uk.

Heirs and Graces: A History of the Modern British Aristocracy by Eleanor Doughty is published in September and available for order now