

Britain's BEST

Last November, in conjunction with *Antiques News & Fairs*, we asked the British public to vote for their favourite antiques businesses. Thank you to everyone who voted – read on to find out who won... and why!

FEATURE **NATASHA GOODFELLOW**
PHOTOGRAPHS **RACHEL WARNE & SHANNON TOFTS**

BEST ANTIQUES SHOP **BLIGHTY**

Many people would have doubted the wisdom of opening a destination antiques shop at the height of the recession in October 2009. But in just over two years, Andrew and Sarah Seccombe's singular vision has seen them build not only one of the most recognisable brands in British antiques but also develop a large – and loyal – band of followers.

Identifiable by a striking crown logo inspired by a 19th-century wooden model from the house of Westminster, Blighty specialises in English and colonial pieces: 'Anything that speaks of old country houses or the Raj,' says Andrew. A rare pair of Anglo-Indian tables carved as camels greets us on our visit, while curvaceous cabinets sparkle with delightfully rotund Cotswold Arts and Crafts pots and a stunning Italian reliquary. 'I do let in the odd "foreigner" if it's unusual and I love it,' says Andrew of the latter, 'and I do love reliquaries.'

Indeed, Andrew clearly loves everything he sells and it's this that could well be the secret of his success. 'We try very hard to build good relationships with our clients,' he says. 'We reassure them that what they're buying is good quality and an investment, and will search for things they're looking for. But mostly it just comes down to the stock. Clients buy one thing from us and they're addicted.' Easy to say perhaps but voters' comments back him up. 'I have introduced Blighty to many of my friends, who are all now hooked,' writes one, while another enthuses, 'Thanks to the owner's unique eye, you can never be sure what wonderful thing you will walk out with!'



❖ **BLIGHTY ANTIQUES**
11 Great Norwood Street, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, GL50 2AW.
07970 143907; blightyantiques.com

Andrew
and Sarah
Seccombe
with their
incredibly
well-behaved
dog, Shanti



BEST SPECIALIST SHOP CHRISTOPHER CLARKE

A quick peek in the windows of Christopher Clarke in Stow-on-the-Wold could lead you to believe you were looking in the windows of an ordinary antiques shop. But look a little longer and you'll see it's anything but. Doesn't that chest have rather odd handles? Aren't they hinges I can see on that chair? And what on earth are those hooks doing on that tent pole?

Sean and Simon Clarke, who decided to specialise in campaign furniture when they took over their father's shop around 10 years ago, can explain all these anomalies and more. 'We were drawn to this area partly because the pieces come apart and "do stuff"', says Sean, 'but also because you can very quickly put them into a social context.' So, thanks to the brothers' painstaking research, a brass-bound leather trunk can be traced to the Battle of Waterloo; a so-called 'naval chair' is swiftly collapsed, accompanied by an explanation of the origin of the term 'clearing the decks'; and the 'Securem' tent pole strap, c1890, was apparently just the thing from which soldiers in the field could hang their coats, swords or, on the longer hook, lanterns.

Voters clearly appreciate this level of knowledge and enthusiasm and especially the in-depth catalogues that accompany the brothers' twice-yearly exhibitions. There's an element of the joy of discovery among the comments too, with several people writing that entering the shop felt like stepping back in history. As one voter put it: 'Simply fascinating, even when you're stuck at the lights in Stow.'



❖ CHRISTOPHER CLARKE
The Fosseway, Stow-on-the-Wold,
Gloucestershire, GL54 1JS.
01451 830476; campaignfurniture.com



Sean (left) and Simon Clarke demonstrate the portability of their campaign furniture



BEST VINTAGE SHOP NANADOBIE

For Alys Dobbie, customer service is everything. She's at her shop, Nanadobbie, six or seven days a week, 51 weeks a year (shutting only between Christmas and new year) and is often to be found – with customers' wish lists in hand – sourcing at fairs at 5.30 am. 'I love the thrill of buying but, even more, I love it when a customer comes in and I have what they're looking for,' she says.

Judging by voters' remarks, she often does. In her light, bright shop (named after her grandmother), Fifties oak desks, statement chairs, unusual lighting and gloriously colourful Scandinavian glass pull in customers from teenagers ('They buy the rotary phones because they've never seen them before,' says Alys) and self-styled 'lighting freaks' to pensioners buying back Ladderax units they wish they'd never thrown away. As one of her fans says, 'It rocks!'

'I suppose our style is classic mid-century modern,' says Alys, whose father Mike, her business partner, runs another branch in Cornwall. 'We don't just do Seventies or retro, and I try and keep away from the word kitsch.' Quality, however, is a word very much on her lips. She'll only buy G Plan if she considers it special enough, and likes to have the odd high-end collector's piece – such as a beautiful wooden Brian Willsher sculpture – in the mix. Even her beloved Border Terrier Fred has come under scrutiny in his time. 'I couldn't bear the thought of a horrible dog bed,' she laughs, so he now resides, in aesthetic bliss, in an old vintage suitcase under a sideboard.



❖ NANADOBIE
16 Gloucester Road, North Laines,
Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 4AD.
01273 676778; nanadobbie.com



Alys Dobbie's shop is as colourful as she is herself





Brian Clements on the rostrum; Scottish art and whisky are specialties

BEST AUCTION HOUSE **McTEAR'S**

How many of us would feel happy to publicly admonish our boss – even if it were in jest? The staff at McTear's auction house on the outskirts of Glasgow have no such qualms, gleefully teasing, 'No texting on the rostrum!' as managing director Brian Clements takes a moment during our photoshoot to send a message.

There's an ease about the place that's evident as soon as you walk in. The valuations staff, five of whom are women under 30, are busy chatting to clients; the coffee machine in the cafe is going at full throttle; and the music-filled salerooms – today set up with jewellery, furniture, Scottish contemporary art and whisky – are abuzz with a steady stream of visitors sizing up potential buys. It is

undoubtedly, as so many of its supporters point out, a friendly place.

Currently in the midst of a television advertising campaign, it's also very progressive and forward-looking – and it's growing fast. In the last two years, sales of art alone have increased seven-fold, helped last year by the sale of a Sir Alfred Munnings painting for £100,000, an auction record for the firm. Although McTear's continues to hold a general interiors auction every week, Brian attributes much of the company's success to its departmentalised approach, with dedicated specialists for each discipline – 'Unusual for an auction house of our size,' he says.

Either way, it all comes back to the staff. 'I think this is the best team of people I've had working with me,' Brian continues. 'Their knowledge, enthusiasm and good vibes shine through.' And it seems McTear's fans couldn't agree more.



❖ **McTEAR'S**
Meiklewood Gate, 31 Meiklewood
Road, Glasgow, G51 4EU.
0141 810 2880; mctears.co.uk



FROM BACK:
Owner Adrian
Gilmour with
manager Liz
Browne and
dealers Dennis
Brockwell and
Linda Richie

BEST ANTIQUES CENTRE HUNGERFORD ARCADE

Of all the entries in the awards, Hungerford Arcade garnered the most votes overall. And having spent the best part of a day there for the photoshoot, it's easy to see why. Faces we'd seen wandering round the warrenesque interior were still there several hours later and, when the moment came for the portrait shot, queues at the till were such that we had to wait a good 30 minutes before our sitters could take a break. So just what is its special appeal?

Just over 100 dealers occupy the former manor house (built in 1360) and, clichéd though it is, there really is something for everyone, from a pretty but broken 18th-century teacup in the basement junk shop for 25p to a beautiful, opalescent

Lalique 'Antelopes' vase for £10,000 from dealer David Pym. Britain's Best Antiques Shops supporter Kirstie Allsopp even bought her first ever antique here. 'We don't want to be too scruffy but not too smart either,' says owner Hazel Browne, who took over the centre eight years ago with Adrian Gilmour. Children are greeted with offers of treasure: 'Bits of Roman pottery, old pennies or perhaps shot from the Battle of Newbury' says Adrian. 'They love it!' Events – think apple weeks and blacksmithing workshops – keep things interesting. And the beamed upstairs cafe is a big hit.

More than anything else though, regular visitors – and there are lots of them – seem to consider the arcade as something of an old friend. 'Ever since I can remember, a monthly visit to this fabulous place was always on our agenda,' writes one voter, 'and now I am middle-aged, I'm still in the habit of "popping" in and losing a couple of hours browsing and enjoying the treasures.'



❖ HUNGERFORD ARCADE
26 High Street, Hungerford,
Berkshire, RG17 0NF. 01488 683701;
hungerfordarcade.co.uk