

Eric Knowles

A month in the life of

Another episode in the (extraordinarily busy) life and times of our favourite BBC Antiques Roadshow presenter, Eric Knowles

In some ways the month departed might be described as relatively quiet if only because my travels have been somewhat limited to England. As I tap away I am also only too aware that a significant amount of time has been spent in my office sorting out my new life – I left Bonhams at the end of 2008 after 32 fascinating years, although I have maintained some contact by way of a consultancy arrangement.

Either way, the last few months have been so frenetic that I now wonder how on earth I could have possibly fitted the 'Old Firm' into my diary. Consequently, time management has become even more relevant as I endeavour to introduce a brand new 'all bells and whistles' website while setting up my own valuation service, both of which will be operational by the time your eyes read these words.

The only problem is that while all this has been going on I have been busily engaged picture researching for a Shire reprint of John Bly's classic *Discovering English Furniture* as well as preparing for three books from *Yours Truly* – and not forgetting a 90-minute educational video on a subject about which I will tell more next month. So I think it fair to say that life is far from dull.

As I put thoughts to my hard drive we have only just emerged out of the big chill of February into the promise of March, and for the diarist

in question summer can't come soon enough.

February brought me the sad news that a dear friend of a good many years had passed away. I first met Phyl way back when I had just given a lecture to the East Warwickshire Antiques Society on the topic of Lalique glass – well, no surprises there I suppose.

Having introduced herself she went on to tell me that her late husband had collected a type of 18th century glass by someone called Beilby and would I send a colleague from Bonhams to come along and value it all. Needless to say, I did the job myself and we became good friends. Having attended her memorial service Anita and I (new readers to this diary page born within sound of Bow Bells, for 'Anita' read 'Trouble and Strife') soon realised that we were part of a head count that day that probably totalled over 150 souls. Phyllis Catherine Whiteman had undeniably been Kenilworth's 'Mrs Congeniality'. What's more it was lovely to learn that she had greeted each and every one of us with the same endearing, 'Hello Daaaarling'.

Weaving Moorcroft magic

A few days later and it was a Moorcroft day, whereupon I headed to South Kensington and the Victoria and Albert Museum. I was met by Elise Adams, the MD, and Lesley Cartledge, who was on hand to demonstrate the skill of

tube lining and painting. Elise and myself each gave a back-to-back 40-minute talk with EK doing the historical bit while EA gave a modern day overview. The event was open to all Friends of the V&A plus their guests, with the new Sackler theatre showing very few empty seats that day. Truth be told, Lesley proved to be the real star of the event – all those who watched her weave her magic did so with their lower jaws slightly adrift.

The next afternoon and Mrs K and I headed for Heathrow terminal 1 for a quick hop up to Manchester where nothing was on hand to whisk us off first to the marvellous Midland Hotel before taking us on to the Manchester Metropolitan University.

I had agreed to act as auctioneer that evening for a fundraiser in aid of The Wesley, a charity dedicated to helping provide pre-owned furniture to those in need. The charity is located in a nearby Wesleyan chapel – hence the name. The auction itself had previously formed an intriguing exhibition shown at the university and consisted of a series of large and small photographic images by Lee Garland featuring the charity volunteers and their warehouse. Lee's efforts were complemented by a series of everyday domestic plates carved and pierced (by means of some mystical high powered water jet – don't ask!)

with peacock motifs and others embellished with gilt profile portraits featuring personalities known to the artist responsible. That artist being C J O'Neil, who took her peacock theme from a William De Morgan dish that forms part of the university's impressive Arts and Crafts reference collection. The end result saw the charity's coffers better off to just short of £3,000.

Moorcroft continued to keep me on my toes the following weekend by arranging a visit to Ashwood Nurseries near Stourbridge.

Now it might seem an odd venue to promote the finest art pottery in the world – fact, and no debate necessary! – but the pottery's floral output truly complements all else on offer. If you live in that part of the world and have never been and seen then put it



on your must-do list. I have to admit that I experienced no small amount of guilt having wandered through what can only be described as 'the garden of Immaculate Conception'. This primarily because my own gardening skills gravitate more towards vegetation control – forget the secateurs pass me the machete! The good news was that the Moorcroft faithful turned out in enough force to fill three lectures that day and by the end of the evening I had almost lost my voice. God bless honey, lemon and a certain Johnnie Walker.

Having driven home that evening, the next day witnessed the 'Knowlesmobile' fighting its way along the M6 and making for Alvaston Hall on the outskirts of Nantwich in Cheshire. I was making a return visit as part of my Warner Hotels Antique Breaks (for further information check out my new website). Once again the three-day event included lectures, a valuation session as well as the obligatory visit to Stoke-on-Trent and those potteries that continue to buck the crunch – all they need to survive is our support!

No sooner had Thursday disappeared than so too did the Knowlesmobile – on the back of a recovery lorry heading back to Bucks with gearbox problems. Fortunately, help was on hand with a replacement vehicle, which meant that I made it on time later that afternoon to collect 'she who must be obeyed' from Manchester airport – believe it or not, flying from home

was the cheapest option; alas, on the minus side, 35 minutes does limit you to only one G and T.

From there we joined the great North West rush hour, arriving shortly before 7pm at the Rosehill House Hotel in my native Burnley, although yet again, I should point out that I actually hail from nearby Nelson. Rosehill House is a treasure of a building that retains much of its Gothic revival interior including an amazing ceiling and white marble fireplace. Jacquie, the owner, told me the place dates from the 1850s and is thought to be by Pugin, but sadly the deeds are missing. If you just happen to be in that part of God's country the hotel is situated on Rosehill Avenue off Manchester Road.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes! Within 30 minutes of arriving we both managed a quick change in order to meet the Mayor of Burnley and her Consort – I was the after dinner speaker that evening. The place was packed to the gunnels, and being a local lad, I was allowed to drift back into the vernacular and spoke for well over an hour to a most receptive gathering of the town's great and good. I have to admit that speaking at length is never too much of a problem for someone who loves the sound of his own voice – while equally keen to show that all those lessons at the Fred Dibner School of Elocution had obviously paid off.

Until next time. 📺

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Lee Garland, photographer extraordinaire, with just a few of his images.



Rosehill House Hotel, Burnley – Gothic revival splendour in the dining room ceiling.



The much talented Ms C J O'Neil and an example of one of her gilt portrait plates featuring C J O'Neil.



Saggars bottom knocker makers, Stoke-on-Trent 1920. (Photo courtesy of The Gladstone Museum)