



GOOD AS GOLD

Antiques icon Ronald Phillips on Bruton Street is the last dealer in the area. So is this a blessing or a curse? Owner Simon Phillips fills us in and tells us why he'll never leave Mayfair

BY LORNA DAVIES

A treasure trove of antiques just off Berkeley Square, Ronald Phillips holds a magnificent array of pieces, laid out like a dream home. There's a library armchair owned by the Earl of Carnarvon (whose home, Highclere Castle, is now better known as Downton Abbey); a beautiful globe circa 1850 by Thomas Malby, with 24 hand coloured engraved segments; and a mahogany Victorian dining table, which extends radially by rotation, enlarging before your very eyes. It's stamped in the centre, "Johnstone Jupe & Co, New Bond Street, 1073", and has a Royal Warrant, a true Mayfair star.

Speaking of Mayfair stars, the antiques store is now owned by Simon Phillips, who took over from his father Ronald 15 years ago.

"It was started in 1952 by my father in South Kensington, then we moved to this building and we had one floor; workshops and store room were at the back, and you're sitting in the old kitchen," Simon tells me from his beautifully furnished office.

The workshop is still there, a rare find in Mayfair, but the rest of the store has grown significantly. Simon says he's had to adapt the business with the market, now picking only the best of the best.

"The market has changed. We took the view to buy less things and better, and if we hadn't done that we wouldn't have survived. The rich want the best, or something very different that their next door neighbour doesn't have – there are no ifs and buts."

Back in the 1950s, the market was "far more commercial" according to Simon. "Two pillar dining tables, six and two chairs, side boards, you know, functional furniture which a lot of people today call brown furniture, but that was a lot more saleable in the old days."

Simon's neighbours on Bruton Street have changed too; it's now home to the likes of Temperley London, Isabel Marant, Stella McCartney and Diane von Furstenberg, a departure from the antiques mecca of Mayfair's past.

"We're the only one left in this street now, sadly. Next door used to be furniture, Mount Street used to have three or four furniture, Bond Street had two. The market has shrunk completely – Partridge closing down, Norman Adams,

Hotsper, Jeremy, you name it." Despite the bowing out of many antiques icons, Simon assures me that he is here to stay.

"We are known here, Mayfair is still the best. There are a couple of very good shops in the Fulham Road, but Mayfair is very much the centre. The restaurant world is fantastic here, the art world is fantastic – I just wish there were a few more antique dealers."

Experts in English fine antique furniture, Phillips' clientele has changed a little over the years. "It's still basically foreigners for their houses in London or the country. We're buying from the English on the whole, and America is still very much a part of our market. We don't have as many interior designers as we used to. In the old days we used to have loads of them. They'd come in with plans, go round the shops, filling all the gaps. They're still around, but it's far less."

Simon and his team prefer to work directly with the clients, building relationships. They even allow clients to swap pieces if they don't fit or work in their houses. "We have lots of clients we've known for years and years. The trouble is they get full. We have to wait for them to buy another house," he quips.

I ask Simon what drove his father to start the business: "I don't think he could do much else, a little bit like me," he smiles. "I think by default probably. For me, it happened to be a real love, and it still is. It's a sort of paid hobby, just with too many hassles. I always loved antiques. Now I treat these things like works of art, not just bits of furniture. They've got to be that bit more special, but still functional on the

whole. I very much grew up with it, and I started the day after leaving school." He points to a stunning painted mirror: "What's remarkable is that the glass went out to China, got painted and it came back still in one piece, so how they've survived is remarkable."

Simon's working week involves travelling to source pieces: "Trying to sell eight days a week, collecting seven days a week. Mainly from private collections, auctions, other dealers, abroad, things we've had before. The things we've had before, providing they're good enough, are our best form of supply. We know the article, we know it's of high quality."

When he has a rare spare moment, he likes to visit Harry's Bar and 5 Hertford Street: "I think Mayfair's great. There are so many great restaurants and shops, I wouldn't want to work anywhere else."



RIGHT: a George II carved giltwood chimney piece attributed to Matthias Lock

OPPOSITE MAIN: Simon Phillips
OPPOSITE LEFT: the Earl of Carnarvon's library armchair