

OUR ANTIQUE SOUK

by

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The character and appearance of the place in which he lives is part of the wealth or poverty of a citizen. If this be true, then all the citizens of New Alresford are a little richer, for the new parts are relaxed and spacious and the old of a quiet and singular elegance.

One of the comparatively new changes to Alresford is the arrival of the trade in antiques. I myself count that there are eleven antique shops in this comparatively small place all crowded within the ancient "T" formation of roads laid out by order of Bishop de Lucy. Alresford is not a quaint village, but these elegant shops have become part of its beauty. To walk now along East and West Streets and Broad Street and to look at the wild, unplanned varieties of architecture that yet — except for two shops and a tangle of drooping wires — yet make an organic whole such as no architect could contrive is still a privilege. Perhaps they are unified by their roof tiles, but they are certainly adorned and made still more entertaining by their fiercely unquaint antique shops. These streets have become like open air museums, but more fun in a way because, in theory, everything is available to you. Alresford has become bazaar, a sort of occidental souk and beside the antique shops there are others that sell unexpectedly pleasing things. It has become a town where, without snobbery, the elegant and the entertaining flourish.

In an "Observation" like this, it would be a simple exercise to cause offence. I have made no value judgements. I have set out the shops in no order of merit. As I went round, no single person was incivil and I am the proudest and prickliest sort of reporter on the job, but here there was nothing but courtesy in what was essentially a prying operation.

I think there was a sort of antique/souvenir shop before the First World War on the corner of The Dean. Certainly there are a series of artifacts marked, "A present from Alresford" and one of those that I keep in a cupboard was made in Germany. But the present boom was started by Mr. Lawrence Oxley in 1952.

He was a civil servant with the Royal Ordnance. During the war his small department was evacuated from Portsmouth to avoid the bombs that never actually fell on his establishment. He liked the place. Bought a house in Broad Street. Then he began to sell things, any things and slowly began to concentrate upon books. From that, he began to concentrate upon *orientalia*, particularly books upon India. He now has an international reputation, is a dry, witty, practical man of astonishing enterprise whose shop, most elegantly re-done behind its curved windows, is the sort of place you can stand and talk in and look and be surprised by desirable books and rare prints. He now deals a lot in international book fairs. He has his own workshops at the end of his long, medieval, strip cultivation, Broad Street garden. He restores books and buys libraries whole like that of the late Lord Selborne. He has a line in superbly leather bound books and just as anywhere in Alresford, you are apt to hear the accents of the Dutch and the Germans ordering argosies of good things to be sent back home or a young man looking for some oil paints or a retired Major picking over the shelves as if they were open boxes of chocolates.

He was really the Founding Father and is now a Winchester Councillor with his blue gown and bits of fur in strategic places. Limping, quizzical, with a tendency to disapproval rather than praise, he is one of the leading citizens of the parish. And his shop is his creation and is a very special place for those who care and know about such things.

One successful antique shop in a virgin town parthenogenically begets others. But by chance Alresford is strategically well situated, it lies upon one of the great antique dealers' routes to the West Country. It is rich in parking places. It is handsome and it is axiomatic in the Trade that the more elegant your premises the little more you can charge. And then when the shops begin to cluster like bees, the dealers put it on their route. And dealers in large part exist by selling to other dealers until the gate-legged table, the oak coffer,

the brass warming pan or the Staffordshire figure reaches its final, but yet always temporary resting place, in a private house, bestowing pride and pleasure and perhaps a reasonable investment against inflation.

The enterprise and inventiveness of the 18th and 19th Century England, assisted by an Empire, produced the first great middle class in the world and they wanted decent furniture for their terrace houses and detached villas. The French produced masterpieces for their aristocracy and the Italians monumental furniture for their innumerable and all but uninhabitable palaces, but the English invented comfort and a scaled down grandeur which is precisely the sort of furniture that the monied world now wants. It is the right size. It is finely made. It is highly individual. It cries aloud of a personal taste. And it has the reassurance of having being tested by use and time and, as Alresford displays, we still have a, nearly, inexhaustible supply of it.

For this there are three excellent shops. To begin with there is Mr. Tom Rogers' shop in West Street. It is not arranged like a shop. Here is decent furniture and things that have of late become beautiful to our eyes, Staffordshire and Sunderland made for the pennies of the poor, all set out in a deceptively leisurely sort of way and Mr. Rogers behaves like a host. I recommend this place if you have forgotten your wife's birthday.

Then there is Terry Parry's in Broad Street. This is closer to being the conventional antique shop, though it has no shop windows, just the front windows of a pleasant house to peer through. On the whole, he is a dealer's dealer who spends about two days a week away buying. He, like the others, depends upon his discernment and his show rooms are full of surprise found for the most part in the Midlands and the North, fine Victorian furniture, eccentric pottery, brass and steel by-gones; this is a shop of a slight and pleasing eccentricity at whose window almost all strangers pause in surprise and then think all the other houses in the street are shops and so peer with cupped hands through their windows. Come to think of it, all the shops worth mentioning have characters as strong and distinct as public houses.

Grenville Gore Langton came to Alresford in 1964. Again he sells mostly to dealers from an exquisite bow windowed house in East Street. The house has a splendid staircase, humble and noble at the same time. His rooms are crammed with small sized reasonable things, small desks, and chest of drawers which flat dwellers in Germany and Holland lust after. The French like walnut, the other two like oak. The Italians have almost stopped buying for obvious reasons. The English have begun to hang on to their possessions, out of love and prudence. Never sell to a man who knocks at your door with a roll of bank notes just within sight.

Then there are the specialist shops. There is a new one in East Street that specialises in oriental works of art. It is run by Tim Wright who can travel 1000 miles a week looking for treasures and depending upon his expertise. There is Evans and Evans who sell clocks to the whole world from the same street, a highly expert place that looks like a mad museum of time marvellously desirable with workshops at the back for the expert restoration or repair of what are sometimes museum pieces.

There is Althea Wilson's in East Street. This has a curiously American, a New England look about it because she specialises in pine wood furniture which the colonial Americans used and contemporary American now almost mount in gold. Much of her furniture is of that farmhouse simplicity and craftsmanship that turns it into timeless architecture. And the odd thing about pieces like this is that a magnificently plain diningroom table costs less than its smart equivalent from a modish London shop and that this one will be worth more at the end and the other sadly depreciated.

Then there is the grandest of all the shops, Bennett and Stow, in Broad Street. It is set in two elegant houses with a splendid garden and it tends to sell treasures to the rich and the foreign. One of the pleasures of Alresford is to look in the windows of this old Mitford house and see a sparsely and richly furnished room. As in all the shops you never know quite what to expect, some monumental bureau, some gilded consoles, a piece of rich glass on a round library table. It never seems to be in a hurry. As in most of these shops business beats a path to Alresford and Alresford has to do less and less hunting. They cannot always get new things of the excellence they require and the German taste is not quite their's — but it is a reticently spectacular place.

Then on the edge of the town there is Beresford House. This is a heaped up, crowded, crammed and rather witty shop. You do not know what to expect. For example Mrs. Margaret Smith specialises in old textiles and clothes and has a massive and important private collection of them. On sale are some pretty spectacular numbers, but they have been spoilt for collecting by having been altered for "dressing up" which will not do at all. She lectures seriously all over the area on costumes and so gets offered specimens from out of attic trunks. She has a sideline in buttons which is profitable because modern buttons are beastly. Mr. Smith, a towering ex-farmer, has a collection of 250 copper jelly moulds that come from a time when winter meat was poor and sometimes 'off' and aspics as well as fruit jellies were a normal part of middle class diet. He is the accepted expert in England on their authenticity. Very properly their old curiosity shop is dominated by a large portrait of a more than usually complacent Queen Victoria.

They have gone further and have bought the Methodist church next door. This is the chapel which behind a memorial gateway and a charming garden, stands well back from the road and yet has what I think is the most elegant facade and windows in Alresford. It is an austere and restrained jewel. They are going to turn it into a museum, putting an extra floor in to house their collections and using the gallery as a lecture area. It is a decent use of a redundant church and it will give something for women visitors to do at week-ends while their men are off worshipping steam engines at the railway station.

And then there is the Hobby Horse in Broad Street which is a wholly successful mixture of junk shop, social centre, bargain basement, treasure chest and bran tub. It is run by Monica Griffin and Guy Ingram with a sort of genial authority. You can find anything there from shatteringly dreadful watercolours to plastic buckets, to fire irons and little bits of art nouveau to button hooks to crucifixes to mountains of old curtains to antique linen to brown tea pots to kitchen stools. Again people just bring things in to be sold and the stock seems to be in perpetual motion. I do not know any other shop anywhere quite like it. They keep a serene pride in their bits and pieces that sometimes cracks into laughter over it. I have found it a most useful place. You can even find bargains!

There are confidential areas in the antique trade which of course apply to Alresford. I have not written about mark ups or how they really get their merchandise nor the degree of cunning necessary to make a success of a shop. Even journalists in a corner turn moral and refuse to reveal their sources. In fact the dealers of Alresford were astonishingly frank. I have heard people complain that there are too many of them. But they seem to flourish and they help to make the Great Walk — down Broad Street, along Ladywell Lane, along the river (being careful not to fish in it!) up the Dean, which I regard as a street of almost Eastern mystery and along West Street — as one of the most entertaining walks in England. And I hate walking. The shops make the exercise almost tolerable.

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