

# Partners in time



Can you tell a walnut from a gozunder? If not, you might need to do a little more than touch wood when it comes to antique furniture. Report by Sue Elliott, pictures by Roger Adams.

**T**HERE is something rather comforting about passing much-loved possessions from one generation to the next. But sometimes it can be quite difficult to tell if you have a real little treasure in the family.

Penny Brittain is a consultant to Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers at Stansted Mountfitchet, as well as running her own consultancy The Art and Antiques Service. She is often asked for advice on pieces that have been inherited, many times in front of television cameras for programmes like the *Antiques Roadshow*.

"Living with an antique is a lot like living with your granny. It needs love and attention and has a special story to tell," she said.

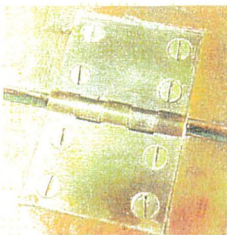
When her two sons were younger, the family lived in Cambridge. They have recently moved to one of the outlying villages and Penny often teams up on restoration projects with furniture restorer and conservation expert Andrew Matthews at his Barton workshop.

"The big question, if you inherit a piece of furniture, is 'Do you like it?'. If you do, and it will fit in with the way you live, then that is the main thing, and obviously the sentimental value can be important too," said Penny.

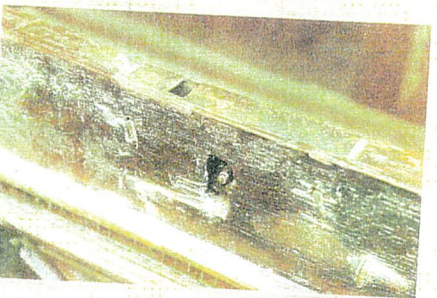
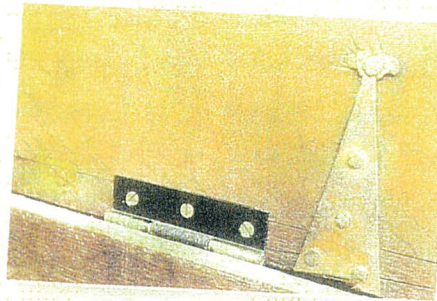
"But it is still best to find out as much as you can about a piece before you decide to get rid of it or not."

A good place to start is to ask a local expert to give the item the once-over.

"Look for a reputable dealer, such as a member of BADA or LAPADA, or an independent consultant or auctioneer and ask them what it might be worth for sale or insurance purposes," she said.



You might not know the story of a piece of furniture so look at details like these hinges: the modern one on the right sits close to a much older one which an expert can date.



Repairs, such as new locks or alterations, are an important part of the history of a piece.

Here is Penny and Andrew's checklist:

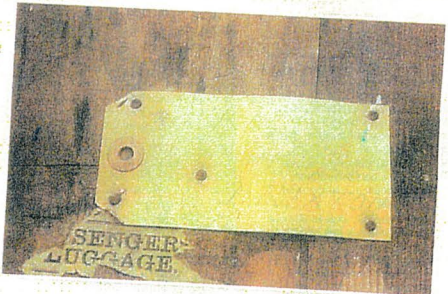
- 1** Have a good look at the piece, there may be clues like labels or even date stamps. Take care not to rip off old paper stickers or even delivery details which may be stuck to the under-side or inside.
- 2** Check the basic condition; can you see if anything is broken or needs replacement.
- 3** Look hard for old repairs, they might give good clues about its past.
- 4** Check for signs of woodworm; active pests often leave a tell-tale dust.
- 5** Drawer handles are a good indicator of age. Do they look as if they have been changed?
- 6** What type of wood is it made from. As a rough guide, oak was widely used for furniture from 1500-1650; walnut from 1650-1730; mahogany and exotics like rose and satin wood from 1730-1860; while mahogany and all other woods were used from 1860-1900.

Said Andrew: "This is a very, very rough guide to the ages of the three main timbers used for English furniture manufacture. Each one has continued to be used whatever 'age' it was, but it is generally accepted that each period contains the highest quality and quantity of pieces."

He trained at the London College of Furniture, and worked in London before setting up his own business in Cambridge in 1998. Regular clients include Kettle's Yard Museum and Trinity College, Cambridge.

He and Penny were introduced at a Cambridge Enterprise meeting a few years ago and realised they were on the same professional wavelength from the word go. They have worked together regularly since, tracking down the history of items for clients and restoring pieces to their former glory.

Provenance, anything that shows the origin or history of a piece is valuable, so don't 'tidy away' clues like delivery labels which might still be attached to the back or inside.



The British Antique Dealers' Association and London and Provincial Antique Dealers' Association have lists of members in different regions. Andrew Matthews is a graduate member of the student section of the British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association. He can give estimates and advice with no obligation. Contact him on (01223) 264963 or 07808 590370, or BAFRA on (01305) 854822. Art and Antiques Service: (01763) 837224. Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers: (01279) 815300.

Main picture: Timeless - antiques expert Penny Brittain looks over a 19th Century long case clock with Andrew before it undergoes restoration.

Andrew at work in his workshop at Barton.

