

Christopher Payne Biography

Christopher Mackley Payne is the fourth generation of his family to establish a career in the world of furniture. In the 1880s his great-uncle established a furniture shop in Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, in the heart of England's fox hunting country. His grandfather, son of a farrier, was sent to Northampton to train as a furniture salesman and, at the age of twenty-six, returned to Melton Mowbray where he established a modest furniture shop on the corner of Leicester Road and the somewhat exotically named Park Lane. Here he sold antique furniture, at a time when a Queen Anne walnut tallboy cost only a few guineas, as well as contemporary furniture and modern commissions. Marrying into the Mackley family brought much needed capital into the business which expanded into a three-storey Georgian building at 26 Market Place. In the 1930s Charles Payne's only child, 'Tony' joined the business and as a young man sourced furniture, old and new from far afield to meet the demand from the influx of the wealthy hunting fraternity. These hunting 'boxes' were not modest affairs. Christopher Payne was born in Coventry House in 1948, a double-fronted Georgian house by the river Eye, complete with a ballroom and of course stabling. The large Victorian house opposite was a favoured lodging for the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, on his frequent visits to the area. As a child in the 1950s Christopher was privileged to spend many hours 'working' with the skilled cabinetmakers on the third floor of the nineteenth century workshops, which started a fascination with wood and its possibilities. Craftsmen restoring antique furniture and those working on new commissions used the benches.

After reading law at university, Christopher joined Sotheby's in 1970, the idea to spend a few months there and join his father who by this time had sold off the contemporary furniture arm of his business and was concentrating on period furniture having set up Wylton Antiques. In his first week at Sotheby's Christopher knew he was 'hooked' and that London offered so much more experience than a provincial antique shop could. Each week saw a different auction of furniture, which, as a porter, he had to carry from the delivery vans up the stairs into the galleries. The walls too changed weekly, from priceless Old Master paintings to Impressionists and his favourite movement, the Surrealists. He moved through Sotheby's at a time when the market was expanding rapidly. There was no better enthusiast or tutor at the time than the company's chairman, the late Peter Wilson. It would not have been possible to plan a better training ground. Christopher moved from portering to auctioneers' assistant which meant when he took the rostrum himself in 1976, he was familiar with the auctioneers' patter and the requirements of such an exacting but thrilling job.

Auctioneering was an essential part of becoming a head of department. When Christopher took over the Nineteenth Century Furniture Department after two years travelling the country as a valuer, he had to quickly widen his expertise to sculpture. During the season there was one furniture auction a week; the furniture and associated works of art had to be sourced, values set, catalogue descriptions made and the catalogue formatted. By the time his father retired in 1981 Christopher was already a director of the company and was about to publish his first book 'Nineteenth Century European Furniture'. This seminal work published by the Antique Collectors' Club is to be re-published in 2004. His research on sculpture at Sotheby's led to the Antique Collectors' Club publishing his work on 'Animals in Bronze' in 1986. The work for this book gave him a greater understanding of the complexities of bronze casting, a necessary skill when understanding the complexities of Linke's work. Christopher has subsequently published two other titles on furniture and continues to explore the relatively uncharted realms of French nineteenth century furniture, with more titles in mind, when time allows.

Since leaving Sotheby's in 1994, after twenty-five invaluable years experience at the very centre of the art world, Christopher has since been acting as a curator for private collectors whilst continuing to appear regularly as an expert on furniture and sculpture on the established programme, the 'Antiques Roadshow' team since the mid '80s. This programme has been a leading in-depth look into the world of antiques and their values, consistently reaching high into the popularity ratings. Produced by the BBC from its centre in Bristol, the program is shown throughout the English-speaking world on cable and satellite. Christopher has also appeared on the BBC's 'Antiques Inspectors', 'The Great Antiques Hunt' and other programs, including radio broadcasts. He continues to lectures to students and focus groups on furniture of all periods including the Antiques Roadshow Lecture & Conference Service.