

Why Not the Best!

An Interview with Lady Pamela B. Pidgeon, Director and Owner, Great Brampton House Antiques Ltd., Madley, United Kingdom

EDITORS' NOTE More than 30 years ago, after Lady Pamela Pidgeon's first husband, Francis Pamela Howell, retired from the British armed forces, the couple purchased Great Brampton House as a residence, but soon developed it into a business to finance the home's restoration and refurbishing. Major Howell died some 17 years ago, and in 1993 Lady Pamela married Australian Sir John Pidgeon.



Lady Pamela B. Pidgeon

COMPANY BRIEF Set on 30 acres in Herefordshire, England, Great Brampton House Antiques Ltd. deals in rare antique furniture and fine art, including a large collection of English furniture; Louis XIV, XV, and XVI pieces; and oil paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries. It also operates an interior-decorating service.

You're known for being able to furnish an entire apartment or house completely with fine antiques.

Absolutely. We can supply everything. Our furniture is of the highest quality; we have our own workshops, so we can embroider bed linens and make curtains. We can do absolutely everything.

You don't believe a Web site is the proper venue for displaying antiques, do you?

No, I don't. We tried a Web site, but we had a lot of rather strange inquiries, which weren't really genuine. Also, a picture on a screen doesn't bring out how gorgeous or original a piece is.

My really serious collectors around the world usually want to see pictures of a piece, but they generally make the decision to buy while I'm present. So, I make a point of meeting clients, especially new clients. If a client is extremely busy, I might arrange a weekend appointment in Herefordshire, even if it's just for an hour. I think it's important for clients to see the quality and quantity of the stock we have.

I always love people to come to Great Brampton House because the showrooms are always changing, and there's always

something new to talk to them about. And I have some friends who will buy one piece and won't be able to afford to buy another really good piece for another year, but we still keep in touch. And remember: My business is all over the world, not just here in Herefordshire.

You also offer the service of picking people up in London and driving them to Great Brampton House.

Yes, we do. We have two Rolls-Royces and a Bentley, which are used almost exclusively for that purpose. I've made this service available since the day we started the business. Of course, now we have our own helipad as well.

I would say that, this spring, there's going to be the beginning of a great resurgence of people getting their values right. Minimalist furniture is going out. I knew it wouldn't last; it appeals to such a limited number of people. As young people progress in life, get better jobs, and have a really good feeling about life, they want to upgrade everything. They want a nicer car; they want better furniture in their homes. One area sets off another.

I think both English and French furniture will be popular. I also imagine a little Russian furniture will be desired because a few of my Russian clients have come to this country. Actually, four pieces of my furniture are now on display in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The museum purchased them from me.

Is it difficult to find good Russian antiques?

They're very limited – very limited in Great Britain certainly. I currently have in stock a five-piece suite of Russian furniture, with a canopy kind of sofa with an arching back, armchairs, and side chairs. There is as much beautiful decoration on the back of the furniture as on the front. If they were placed in a window, the backs you'd see from the outside would be as lovely as the fronts you'd see in the drawing room.

You also have many antique French pieces.

Yes, they are always popular, espe-

cially among clients who like a little grandeur, whether it's French or Italian.

Is it difficult to establish the provenance of furniture?

It takes a lot of hard work, but we have a really large library, which is full of books on antiques.

When you're restoring something, do you ever find anything interesting, such as the initials of a beloved someone carved in the wood?

No, but you do often find a name that you don't expect to be on there. I have a circular table – a very, very ornate and glamorous one – in the main showroom, and I didn't realize it was signed until it went to the workshop to be cleaned. The name was somewhere I shouldn't think had been dusted for 40 years. So when we cleaned away all of the dirt, we found the signature of the cabinetmaker. That's always a great thrill. And to find furniture illustrated in a very old book is also exciting.

Which is your favorite antique among those in your collection now?

Oh, dear, there are so many things I'd love to keep forever. And yet, probably the most important things to me in life are photographs of my children, my stepchildren, and my grandchildren – things like that.

I live with all these beautiful things all the time, and that is a great joy. But when you're in business, you have to part with anything if the price is right.

I do have the most wonderful cabinet in the world. It's worth at least £5 million. It's so exceptional and rare. It would be hard to part with it, but obviously, I shall have to one day. For now, I just keep it safe.

Are you just waiting for a museum to make an offer?

Yes, perhaps. I've had the cabinet about 30 years, and it came to me painted white. We spent 12 years researching it, and I consulted all the specialists in the world about what should be done and what needed to be restored. We removed all the white paint, down to the original gold leaf. It looks magnificent now, and it is the most wonderful piece of furniture I've ever had the privilege to enjoy. ●

