

SOTHEBY'S TO SELL SIR HENRY PRICE COLLECTION

Self-made Millionaire was Creator of the Fifty Shilling Suit

TAILOR Henry Price made millions from creating the fifty shilling suit, so when it came time to furnish his country mansion and London residence, he famously gave leading antiques dealer Frank Partridge a blank cheque.

Now, 60 years later, the furniture and works of art that Partridge supplied are to be sold by Sotheby's, in a house contents sale on Wednesday, November 22, 2000.

James Miller, Deputy Chairman of Sotheby's Europe, said: "It was an exciting moment for Sotheby's when we discovered that Sir Henry Price's collection had survived, almost intact, having been lost to view after his death. To see this blend of delicate oriental porcelain, robust oak and elaborate giltwood furniture, with Tudor portraits and delicate Restoration needlework pictures, gives one a fascinating glimpse of life in the country houses of pre-war England. It reflects the staggering purchase power of an industrial magnate allied to the commanding taste of Frank Partridge, pre-eminent antiques dealer of his generation. The world has changed since this collection was formed, and the Fifty Shilling Tailor is no more, but the quality that Sir Henry prized is still evident sixty years later. It will be a privilege for Sotheby's to conduct this sale, on behalf of the executors of Lady Price's will."

Born in Leeds in 1877, Henry Price started work in a clothing shop earning just 2/6 (12½ pence) a week. He was aged 12. He subsequently trained as a tailor and aged 19, became manager of the Grand Clothing Hall in Keighley. He married seamstress, Ann Elizabeth Craggs in 1899, and together they set up a market stall selling gentlemen's accessories, but struggling with two jobs, he was forced to choose which career to follow.

The couple spent sleepless nights praying they would make the right decision and eventually the young man chose to go it alone. The outcome was 'Price's Tailors' which later went on to become the world's second largest tailoring chain, with more than 500 shops and 12,000 employees.

The couple set up shop in their front room in Silsden with a stock of just three collars to their name. But they were astute marketeers of the business. The collars, made by Ann Elizabeth, were displayed conspicuously in the front window surrounded by the rest of their "stock"... a collection of empty boxes! Life was not easy for Mr Price and in order to buy cloth, he made the 30-mile round trips on his bicycle that saw him wear through his trousers! However, his first premises, a small shop in Keighley, Yorkshire, opened in 1906.

The business expanded and more shops followed but their understanding of the importance of display remained a key factor in the use of large shop windows. A sense of humour must have also helped. On one occasion, when an out-of-control bus drove into their shop window in Silsden, the couple drolly displayed a sign which read "Business as Usual!" The turning point in the business came with his clever idea of "the fifty shilling suit" (£2.50). Sensing a gap in the market, he sought to cater for the ordinary working man, producing quality suits at the cost of their weekly wage through revolutionary production line techniques. As he said, "I can halve my prices and double my sales". Henry Price's appeal to the mass market paid off and he sought to expand his business with new stores, buying up wool stocks on trips to the Falkland Islands and South Africa to meet demand. It is said that for two years in a row he bought every fleece sent to market in Australia. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Price's Tailors joined the war effort, and production lines changed tack to meet the demand for military service uniforms. After the war they produced de-mob suits for men leaving the armed forces.

Ann Elizabeth died in 1936. Having established a successful business in the North of England, Henry Price took the decision to buy Wakehurst Place in West Sussex later that year, despite falling through a rotten floor on his first visit. He moved there in 1938, and as well as completely restoring the house, he saved the famous gardens created by Sir Gerald Loder.

Knighted in 1937, Sir Henry married again in 1939, his bride Eva Mary Dickson, being nearly 30 years his junior. "Eve" was the perfect hostess and Wakehurst became a place buzzing with weekend shooting parties, halted only in 1941, when he offered the house to the Canadian Army. The collection, which had to be removed and stored for safe keeping in the stables and outhouses, remained unscathed during the Blitz, although bombs fell in the gardens.

As an important member of many industrial committees, Sir Henry was a friend of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan

who lived close by and used to visit him at Wakehurst. Other notable visitors included Queen Mary, who wrote of the beauty of Wakehurst Place, and the Duke of Kent. Sir Henry, who read extensively on foreign affairs, travelled widely and was passionately concerned that people of different cultures should know one another better. Acting on this belief he was a founder member of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and in 1936 established for the Institute a Chair of International Economics at Chatham House. Later, in 1960, he made a generous donation of £100,000 to the UK Committee of the World Refugee Year.

By now financially secure, Sir Henry began to play the stock market, selling his controlling share in the former "Fifty Shilling Tailors" in 1953, the year he was made a baronet. Dividing his time between West Sussex and his London residence Wilbraham House, off Sloane Square, Sir Henry began to devote time to his passion for gardening which he shared with his wife and the couple won many prizes at the Chelsea Flower Show. Every year they gave Christmas parties for the local children and summer fetes were held in the grounds of Wakehurst. Local charitable concerns benefited from his generosity - notably the Chailey Heritage for Children, in West Sussex, and also he set up an old peoples' home in Ardingly.

Always the generous benefactor, Sir Henry did not forget his northern roots, donating to Temple Newsam House, contributing £20,000 to a new Bradford Grammar School and founding another old peoples' home in Scarborough. He was also a major contributor to the University of Leeds, where a Hall of Residence was named in his honour.

Having made his fortune, Sir Henry now sought to surround himself with beautiful objects. To do this he enlisted the help of his good friend and golfing partner, Frank Partridge, proprietor of the renowned fine arts dealers in London's Bond Street. As recorded in a privately published memoir by Partridge, he writes:

"One of the greatest pleasures of my life was the furnishing of "Wakehurst", the home of my good friend, Sir Henry Price. He gave me a blank cheque to do it with, and the only demand he made was that I make the house worthy of the wonderful Sussex countryside which surrounds it."

During the years preceding the Second World War, Sir Henry spent more than £100,000 on antiques for Wakehurst. No aspect of the refurbishment was overlooked by Partridge, who even went to the extreme of purchasing two black swans to enhance the whiteness of their other lakeside companions! Among the 450 lots in Sotheby's sale, estimated to sell for in excess of £2 million, is much of the English furniture, Chinese porcelain and jade, Old Master paintings, Renaissance bronzes and silver purchased by Partridge on Sir Henry's behalf.

Partridge's expertise ensured that Wakehurst was one of the last great collections put together before the Second World War. In keeping with the taste of the time, he selected furniture from the four great ages of English furniture namely, oak, walnut, mahogany and satinwood. As the receipts have survived it is fascinating to see how the values have changed over the intervening sixty years, reflecting the changing tastes of collectors. Of particular note, an Elizabethan oak livery cupboard bought for a staggering £1,000 in 1939 is now valued at £5,000-8,000. An early 18th century Queen Anne walnut armchair with a needlework design of Cleopatra clasping the asp to her breast cost £250 and is now estimated at £25,000-35,000. A set of four mahogany and needlework side chairs, dating from circa 1760, for which Partridge charged £1,807 10s, are expected to sell for £50,000-80,000, while a pair of George III painted satinwood armchairs, circa 1790, cost £125 in 1939 and are now estimated at £10,000-15,000.

On his death in 1963 aged 86, Henry bequeathed the house and estate to the National Trust. It is now managed by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, and is the most visited National Trust property in England.

Lady Price's fascination for Chinese jade explains the many examples included in the sale. A spinach-green and white flecked jade brush pot from the Qianlong period is estimated to sell for £15,000-20,000. The pot is deeply carved with a continuous landscape of scholars in mountainous retreats with pavilions, pines and waterfalls in the background. A pale celadon and duck-shaped tureen and cover is expected to fetch £12,000-16,000, while an apple-green and pale jadeite sceptre, carved with dragons around a Shou character with deer among pine trees is estimated at £3,000-4,000. A 19th century pale celadon jade hair-pin is estimated at £200-300.

The appeal of the Orient is again represented in the fine examples of Chinese porcelain in the sale. A pair of famille-rose fish basins from the early Qianlong period are decorated with ladies on horseback, bearded sages, flowers, gilt bisque lion mask handles and turquoise trellis borders. The pair is estimated at £30,000-50,000. A pair of famille-verte dishes from the Kangxi period are expected to sell for £22,000-£28,000. The dishes are painted with scenes of musicians, scholars, ladies and attendants in a pavilion with deer and peacocks below in the courtyard.

The Oriental theme continues in furniture. An attractive Queen Anne scarlet and gold japanned bureau cabinet is expected to fetch one of the highest prices in the sale. The cabinet, circa 1710, is decorated throughout with Oriental figures, pagodas, flowering plants and trelliswork and is estimated at £150,000-200,000. An earlier red japanned cabinet on a stand, circa 1680, is estimated to sell for £40,000-60,000.

An impressive mid-17th century stumpwork mirror surround depicts the seated figure of Justice enclosed in a wreath with Charles II and Catherine of Braganza on either side. The king, with his French knot coiffure, striped pink and brown breeches and matching velvet-lined cape, holds a sceptre and book. The queen, with peach silk robes overlaid with stripes of pink, yellow and green crochet, has boldly lifted her skirts to reveal the cleverly embroidered floral petticoat. The exceptional colours of the embroidery and the unusually large-scale royal figures make this a spectacular piece estimated to sell for £30,000-50,000.

A fine tent-stitched picture of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus made at the turn of the 18th century, portrays the king in coloured silks on his throne with Esther at his feet, recounting the story of the treacherous Chancellor Haman to her handmaidens, an old Testament story which was a popular theme for embroideries of the day. It is estimated at £2,500-3,500.

Two early 16th century candleholders designed by the workshop of Severo da Ravenna are among works of art in the sale. Made of bronze in Padua, one is shaped as a mermaid and estimated at £25,000-35,000, while the other, expected to fetch £8,000-12,000, is in the form of Marcus Aurelius on horseback.

A bronze fountain figure of Neptune from southern Germany from the 16th–17th centuries, Neptune shown standing and resting one foot on a dolphin is estimated at £50,000-80,000.

Among the paintings in the sale, a portrait of a lady, probably a member of the Goring family by an artist in the circle of Hans Eworth, shows the subject standing three-quarter length in a black embroidered dress with lace cuffs. It is estimated at £40,000-£60,000. A pair of paintings by Johan Christian Roedig; Still Life of Various Fruits and Flowers by a Terracotta urn on a Marble Ledge and Still life of Roses, Tulips and Other Flowers in a Sculpted Vase on a Marble Ledge is estimated at £60,000-80,000. A charming portrait of a young lady, English School circa 1605, is contained within a contemporary needlework case, and is expected to fetch £40,000-60,000.

Press Enquiries:

Lindsay Drewett

Tel: 020 72935166

lindsay.drewett@sothebys.com