

The key moment

Fifteen years ago an auction was held which heralded the online transformation in the bidding process and opened sales up to potential buyers across the world, as *Matt Ball* reports

A unicorn perched on top of an antique piano in an entrance hall greeted the 10,000 visitors who viewed the contents of a recent country house sale.

None of them had come in person, of course. Due to the current lockdown, they were all perusing the vast collection of eclectic items online thanks to a special virtual tour that enabled them to walk through every room in the house and see the lots in situ.

The tour was just one of a host of online initiatives undertaken by Dreweatts, the auction house running the Aynhoe Park country house sale in January this year, to ensure that as many people as possible would browse the catalogue and bid.

The two-day live online-only auction turned out to be a white-glove sale. With so many bids from 3000 online registrants and two rooms of staff taking phone bids, it proceeded more slowly than usual and the auctioneers on the rostrum took regular breaks, to be replaced by a colleague.

One of the auctioneers that day was Clive Stewart-Lockhart, a former Dreweatts managing director and now a self-employed art consultant, who had been drafted in to help out. "I was selling items for £100,000 that hadn't been physically seen," he said, noting how lockdown had made remote browsing and buying the norm.

While the success of the Aynhoe Park sale and its online promotional campaign represents another milestone for online auctioneering, 15 years ago this month at the same firm Stewart-Lockhart had taken another landmark sale: the first auction to use live bidding on thesaleroom.com.

It was this sale, held on March 15, 2006, that launched the modern era of internet bidding among UK regional auction houses and paved the way towards the world of online auctions as we know them today.

"I had actually done a live auction earlier on in the dial-up era," Stewart-Lockhart recalls.

"It was never going to work but there was obviously a good idea there. It was clearly a way of engaging people who can't turn up and for the vendor we would be providing a new bidder who might be spending more."



We soon grasped that the rhythm and flow of the auction had started to change forever

Broadband boon

By 2006 faster connections were widely available and thesaleroom.com – which had been spun out of antiquestradegazette.com (and was, and still is, owned by ATG's parent company) – was ready to host live sales in addition to the online auction catalogues it had been providing.

A number of auction houses were ready to try out the new service from mid-March with Dreweatt Neate, as it was known at the time, the first one. Its owner back then was Stephan Ludwig, now chief executive at Forum Auctions.

"What excited me most about ATG's initiative was the certainty that its newspaper subscribers and growing community of digital registrants would deliver an immediate critical mass of new buyers to our auctions," he recalls. "To this day, their delivery of fresh buyers is one of our most important buyer-acquisition tools."

"I had first invested in the auction industry in 2000 led, in part, by the conviction that e-commerce style execution and fulfilment would lead to a transformation in the industry's revenue and costs. It remains a matter of pride that my firm produced the first auction held over thesaleroom.com."

Being an early adopter of technology was nothing new to Dreweatt Neate. Its original telephone number was Newbury 1 – indicating the firm was the first in its area to get connected (the original handset was recently rediscovered in a cupboard at the firm's premises). Later, when its hometown had become the headquarters of Vodafone, the auction house's staff were all equipped with mobile phones well before the device had become mainstream elsewhere.



Ahead of its first live online auction, however, one communication challenge remained. "Our primary concern at the time was the practical reality of both multi-second latency and the inherent instability of ADSL internet connectivity," says Ludwig. "Happily a dedicated 'leased line' resolved this concern, albeit the monthly BT bill to connect Donnington Priory to the Reading exchange probably outweighed the incremental income from additional bidders in the early years!"

While this was being arranged, ATG was

On March 15th, you can bid for this globe from anywhere on it.

A rare George II Cary's 13 inch floor standing globe, on tripod base with compass. Estimate: £2,000 to £3,000.

Dreweatt Neate
Donnington Priory Salerooms, Newbury
Wednesday 15th March at 10:00 GMT

Find out more about this globe via eBay at Dreweatt Neate's Artistic Furniture Clearance in Newbury on March 15th; you can bid in whatever way is most convenient to you – in person or online, or via telephone.

Tell us what you think of the saleroom.com Just like being in the auction room, it's fully interactive and allows you to experience the atmosphere of the saleroom. You will be able to bid, complete视屏 as they appear in the room in Newbury and track the price of your bids throughout the auction.

The catalogue for this sale is online at the-saleroom.com, where you'll also find a fully-searchable price guide of all lots and reserves and bid瀝瀝瀲瀲 for the sale at www.the-saleroom.com.

If you want to bid live from where you live, register for the sale at www.the-saleroom.com

Live auctions from the-saleroom.com
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Catalogue



Main picture: the Aynhoe Park unicorn on the piano within the 360° virtual tour.

Left: Clive Stewart-Lockhart at the Dreweatt Neate auction and at the Aynhoe Park sale (above).

busy promoting the auction with an advertising campaign that ran not only in *Antiques Trade Gazette* but across a range of other publications in the UK, the US and Australia. One advert featured a picture of a lot from the sale with the strapline ‘On March 15 you can bid on this globe from anywhere on it’.

Another showed a room of bidders in corporate attire except for a lady in the front row wearing a white dressing gown with a laptop in front of her. ‘Now you can bid there without being there,’ it proclaimed. Quite how ATG had persuaded

Sotheby’s Olympia to allow it to stage this shot in its premises may never be known.

All change

On the day of the Antique Furniture & Clocks sale Stewart-Lockhart shared proceedings with fellow auctioneer Elaine Binning (a 25-year veteran of Dreweatts, she now works as a consultant at Woolley & Wallis).

“There was a real hush in the room,” says Binning. “People were aware of what was going on as that first lot was sold. With hindsight it was a

real turning point. We were there experiencing a little glimpse into how it might be in the future.”

There was no live video stream yet for bidders, just live audio for them to hear the action going on in the room. Binning’s colleagues, sat at a table near the rostrum, monitored the online activity and raised their hand to indicate a new internet bid had been received.

And it was not just the way the audience could bid that had changed. “We soon grasped that the rhythm and flow of the auction had started to change forever,” says Binning. “Up to that point you were in control of the speed but now there was a slight detachment of the bidder that we’d never experienced before.”

With no opportunity to read body language and no way to make eye contact, auctioneers had to adapt quickly. They were grateful for a new ‘hovering’ feature that was soon introduced to enable them to see how many bidders had their cursor over the bid button and when live video was added a couple of years later they also had to start performing to the camera for the bidders at home as well as for the bidders in the room.

A total of 191 online bidders registered for the Dreweatt Neate sale and bid on 154 of the 376 lots. In the end, a more modest 13 lots were sold to online buyers for a total of £5,510 hammer, representing 1.6% of the sale by value. The top lot sold online was a nineteenth century telescope for £1300. One of the other lots was an early Victorian rosewood work box sold for £150 (pictured on page 34). The buyer was ATG’s Simon Berti bidding from the firm’s London office, which is where the box can be found today – with its original lot label still attached.

Sales take off

The second live auction, held at Tennants on March 18, fared even better with around 10% sold through the internet, and at the two-day sale at Bamfords on March 21-22 an impressive 129 lots sold online (9% of the total) for a hammer value of £35,069.

Other live auctions quickly followed at firms including Wallis & Wallis, Byrne’s, Sworders, WH Lane, Paul Beighton, Peter Wilson and Neales.

Across March and April Dreweatt Neate held a series of sales with live bidding at its venues in

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site that finds the antiques and collectables you are looking for

Live Auctions

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Live Auctions at the-saleroom.com

the auction at the-saleroom.com and it's just like being in the auction room. A live audio feed experience the atmosphere of the saleroom. You see the lots on your computer screen as they appear in the room, and the auctioneer is aware of your bids the moment you make them.

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Far left: advertisement from the *Gazette*.

Left: thesaleroom.com as it looked in 2006.

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Spotlight Online bidding



GAZETTE - 25TH MARCH

Blandford rooms change hands

BLANDFORD Antiques has been under new management since it re-took after a four-year absence from the Dorset saleroom.

The new manager will be

Drewett, who has run

the business since he sold it to

Shaw & Son auctioneers in Blandford in 2013.

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did right

Hiscox sponsor Drummond Read

SPECIALIST insurer Hiscox

have struck a deal to sponsor

the valuation service on

the website for art, antiques and

hiscox have provided a

lot for the online auction

and to online quotes for

insuring their art and antiques.

Precious metals

ON Friday March 17th

Bidder's room at 1pm

22 lots - £15,434.65

£18,455 - £15,227.50

15 lots - £22,207.50

19 lots - £17,237.50

9 lots - £11,010.50

JEWELLERY & PLATE

£4.25 per gram

SILVER

£4.25 per gram

gold

£11.80 per gram

£11.80 per gram