



Of auctions and auction houses

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Owen in China

Hello and welcome, this is Owen and this is my podcast for Friday 18th January, 2019. Happy New Year everyone! May it bring peace and happiness. I hope you all had a nice Christmas and a good start to the year. I have a lot to tell you this month, so let's get cracking [1].

Today, I'll be talking about a trip to an auction [2] and the memories it brought back.

I mentioned my sister last month. Well, she and her family recently moved into a big, old house in the countryside in North Wales. They have a lot more rooms now than they used to and they haven't really had time to look for furniture yet. Consequently [3], some of the rooms are still quite empty. My sister was given an old upright piano for her 40th birthday and that now has its own room. She doesn't have a piano stool yet, though. So, for Christmas I thought I might look into local auctions to see if I could find a nice piano stool for her. Most of the auction houses [4] in the area deal in livestock [5], so sheep and cows basically. But I did find one auction house that deals in household goods and antiques. So I went along to check it out. I didn't know what to expect exactly but I was hoping I might get lucky [6]. Most of the items that were being auctioned off were from the house of someone who had died. From what I could tell the deceased [7] was quite the hoarder [8]. A hoarder is someone who can't throw anything away. There were endless boxes of books and clothes, of course. But then there was also what I can only imagine was every piece of electronic equipment the person had ever owned: old cameras and televisions and VHS players. Remember those? There were lots of things that had never been used and some that had never even been unpacked. Musical instruments, kitchen appliances, you name it [9]. It was like a little window into that person's life. Most of it was worthless to the people at the auction. Things were selling for a pound or two. Every now and again, though, two people would be interested in the same item. That's when things got interesting. There was a box of books that obviously included some valuable edition because it caught the eye [10] of two different people. The bidding [11] like with most items started at one pound but then they started bidding against each other, raising the amount by five pounds each time. They kept going until it finally sold for 150 pounds. It was quite exciting. I didn't find a piano stool for my sister, unfortunately. But I enjoyed the experience nonetheless. I'll have to try again next month.

Here's a question for you: What's the strangest job you've ever had? The reason I ask is because the auction I attended brought back some old memories. Watching the auctioneer [12] and the people bidding on different items, I suddenly remembered that I actually worked for an auction house myself once. I don't know about you, but I always had this image of people in suits and white gloves when I thought of auctions. The auctioneer with the fancy gavel, that little hammer they use when they say: 'Going once, going twice, sold to the gentleman in the back!' Well, I found out that not all auction houses are that fancy when I worked for one in Australia. We never dealt with any antiques or paintings. I worked in a warehouse filled with office furniture. The nicest thing I saw when I worked there was probably a Herman Miller office chair. This particular auction house specialised in second-hand office furniture, so desks and filing cabinets and things like that. There were three of us in the warehouse and we had to prepare the auction every week. There were about a thousand pieces of office furniture up for auction each week, so it was quite a lot of hard work. The company I worked for started off as a moving company. They would move office furniture from A to B and sometimes they were paid to just pick things up and dispose of [13] them. At some point they decided they could make more money if they sold the



items they were paid to get rid of [14]. So they started an auction house. They then also got contracts to furnish [15] offices with second-hand furniture. Second-hand furniture they could buy at their own auctions. I don't think the whole enterprise was very legitimate [16] exactly but it was certainly very clever. They got paid every step of the way and couldn't lose basically. I've always been a bit suspicious of moving companies and my experience working for that auction house certainly didn't change that. The people who ran the company were very shady [17] and all the people who showed up at the auctions were also very shady. I wasn't really interested in anything we were selling at the auctions but all the people who passed through the warehouse were fascinating. People would start showing up [18] a few hours before the auction to have a look at what was on sale. There was free instant coffee that everyone would help themselves to [19] before wandering around the warehouse. Most of them had their own shops nearby and they all knew each other. There was lots of friendly banter [20] and the auction itself was more of a game than anything else. They all had their tricks in order to get a good bargain [21]. If they saw something they liked when they were wandering around with their instant coffee, they would remove something from the item. So, for example, if a filing cabinet had a lock and key, they would lock it and slip the key into their pocket. Once the auction started, no one would bid on a filing cabinet that was locked and missing a key or an office chair that was missing a wheel. Except, of course, the person who had the key or wheel in their pocket. No one seemed to mind because they were all doing it. It was all just a bit of fun really and everyone got what they wanted. Nothing ever sold for more than a few dollars and the auctioneer wasn't to be trusted anyway.

That's just about it for this month. Thank you for listening. Let me know about any strange jobs you've had by leaving a comment below. You can listen to all our episodes by downloading our app or by visiting our website podclub.ch. Remember that you can also download our vocabulary trainer and you can find us on Instagram. I'll be back on 15th February. Until then, going once, going twice, ... goodbye!

Glossar: Owen in China

[1] to get cracking: to start immediately

[2] auction: public sale where goods are sold to the person who offers the highest price

[3] consequently: as a result

[4] auction house: a company that sells items at auctions

[5] livestock: animals that are kept on farms

[6] to get lucky: to be successful because of good luck

[7] deceased: a person who has recently died

[8] hoarder: so. who has to keep collecting things and can't throw anything away

[9] you name it: expression used after a list to indicate that more things of a similar type are also possible

[10] to catch so.'s eye: if something catches your eye, it means you suddenly notice it

[11] bidding: the act of making offers to buy sth. at auctions

[12] auctioneer: the person in charge of an auction

[13] to dispose of sth.: to throw sth. away

[14] to get rid of sth.: to throw sth. away

[15] to furnish: to provide furniture for a room or building

[16] legitimate: here: allowed by the law

[17] shady: here: involved in dishonest or illegal activities

[18] to show up: to appear or arrive

[19] **to help oneself to:** to take for oneself

[20] **banter:** friendly conversation that includes jokes and laughing at each other

[21] **bargain:** a lower than usual price