

Born to deal in antiques

HOW I MADE IT

Spencer Swaffer

founder of Spencer Swaffer Antiques

EVERY Friday morning for the past 20 years, Spencer Swaffer has made sure he is the first person to enter Paris's Porte de Clignancourt flea market when it opens.

Swaffer, 53, said: "I am very superstitious and I have to be the first person through the gates. It used to open at four in the morning but now it happens at six, so I get a bit of a lie-in."

Indeed, he has become such a familiar face that the dealers there have nicknamed him Fleaman and L'Inevitable, because it is inevitable that he will turn up.

Brought up near Brighton, Swaffer was an only child. From the age of 10 he spent his spare time roaming the South Downs looking for shards of Roman pottery, fossils and neolithic axe heads. As his collection grew, he started his own museum in his bedroom, charging visitors 2p to see his finds, to which he would add items bought at jumble sales.

As word of his museum spread, Swaffer — then 12 — was interviewed by the Today programme on Radio 4. Soon afterwards, an antiques dealer visited his museum and offered Swaffer £50 for some Egyptian scarab beetle beads he had bought in a jumble sale for a penny.

It was a defining moment. Swaffer said: "I suddenly discovered I preferred making money to being a museum curator. So I closed the museum and threw away the fossils."

He started taking stalls in local antiques markets, and despite his youth made sure he at least looked the part by always wearing a shirt and tie. He learnt what to buy and sell by watching other dealers, and by the time he was 15 he and a friend who shared his interest were going up to London every weekend to sell antiques in Camden Passage market.

He left school at 18 to open

an antiques shop in Brighton, funding it himself with the money he had made at markets.

He said: "I really loved it. I was always in there at 7.30 in the morning and I would still be in there at 7.30 at night."

At the age of 20, however, Swaffer's life was turned upside down. His mother suddenly died of cancer and less than two weeks later his father killed himself because he couldn't live without her. Swaffer inherited the family bungalow and sold it to buy an old greengrocer's shop in Arundel, West Sussex, which he turned into an antiques shop.

He said: "I called the shop Ancient and Modern, which I thought was terribly clever but now makes me cringe."

The shop specialised in selling unusual items such as enamel advertising signs and soon Swaffer was driving 3,000 miles each week to buy from dealers and auctions across the country. The shop did so well that after three years Swaffer had to move to bigger premises.

His buying sprees did not always go smoothly, however. He once bought a pickled egg jar from a Chinese takeaway and within minutes his van was crawling with lice.

Another time he bought a wooden case containing a life-size plaster model of a human body. "I tied it to the roof rack, but halfway up the M1 the lid of the box blew off and all the organs went flying down the motorway. People must have thought there had been a horrendous accident."

In 2000 he was hit by the collapse of the American stock market and the following year by the September 11 attacks. He said: "The day before September 11 our appointments board was full of meetings arranged with American dealers. Within 24 hours of the disaster the board was completely wiped clean."



Spencer Swaffer set up a museum at 12, was trading on market stalls at 15 and now runs a business with sales of £4m

Fortunately, Swaffer was able to find a market for his antiques in England. The American market has since recovered and accounts for 85% of his sales. Total sales this year are expected to top £4m.

He thinks the secret of his success has been to keep changing the stock in his shop — and to remain debt-free. He has also always paid close attention to

what type of antiques customers are looking for. "I am in the fashion business, not in the antiques business," he said.

He stills does all the buying for the shop and never goes on holiday for more than five days at a time.

Now married for the third time, he said: "I am colossally proud of what I have achieved, to the point of conceit. And

I don't care who knows it."

Despite his success, however, he admits that he still constantly fears that it could all end tomorrow. "I am driven by a fear of failure and by the desire to be the best at what I do. If a cheque doesn't arrive when it is supposed to, I can feel physically ill."

Rachel Bridge

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