

It's out with ...and in with **THE OLD**

*Faith Eckersall meets the antique hunters who say
that in 2017, we'll all be going back to the future*

IF you don't know a credenza from a chiffonier then maybe it's time to find out. Because, say two Winchester women, brown furniture – the solid, well-made stuff you might glimpse in the background of Mr Selfridge, Victoria or Peaky Blinders – will be making a return to our homes over the next 12 months.

Mia Preston and Tanya Knight formed Bowden Knight two years ago after realising they weren't the only people with a passion for antique furniture.

"We met through our children but instead of going out for coffee we'd go out to auctions, trawling for old furniture, artwork and one-off pieces," says Tanya.

"We were already buying for our own homes and sourcing unofficially for friends," says Mia. "People would admire a table or chair and ask where we'd got it, and then asked us to keep an eye out for things for them."

It was their lightbulb moment. "We loved searching for items but realised that other people found it time-consuming," says Tanya. "Because of our specific skills and interest, we saw this was a service we could offer."

As the daughter of an antiques dealer she had grown up around the trade and a three-year antique furniture restoration course increased her knowledge. Meanwhile, Mia had extricated herself from the world of advertising via a course at Chelsea College of Art and launched her own interior design consultancy.

They started taking orders from friends 'and friends of friends' for items such as chairs, tables and mirrors. "People love the solidity of this furniture, it's well-made, individual – you don't generally see the same design very often – and used carefully, has an amazing

effect on a room," says Mia.

It is also frequently less expensive than equivalent items. Because of a well-documented dip in affection for late 19th and early 20th century pieces, prices have fallen. A mahogany chest of drawers worth £1,000 ten years ago could cost as little as £300 now.

Having curated a collection for their Winchester

studio where client visits are arranged by appointment, Bowden Knight launched their website in autumn, 2014.

They didn't have to wait long for their first client, the Hero lifestyle store in Stockbridge. "When they first opened they used our pieces as a backdrop to their merchandise, which looked amazing," says Mia.

Since then they've worked with a number of businesses in the Winchester area. "We approached independent traders on the basis that we thought they'd want an individual look, and because we offer a rental service we thought it would be more flexible for them," says Mia.

The Mantique gentleman's store in Parchment Street, was an enthusiastic early client, finding Bowden Knight's strong, defined furniture a good fit with their masculine style. "We

helped them with their styling and furniture and then sourced suitable accessories for the interior," says Mia.

This led to their biggest commission to date; sourcing antiques and accessories for the £1.8 million refurbishment of the New Forest hotel, Burley Manor, in 2015. "We'd long admired the work of Etre Creative, the Winchester company who had been asked to oversee the project's interior design," says Mia. "We were delighted to be asked to source antiques, ▶



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furniture, picture collections and other items.”

While Burley Manor recycled many of its own collection of handsome Victorian and Edwardian furniture, repairing broken locks and superficial damage, Mia and Tanya went hunting for the missing pieces required by Etre, including quirky and eclectic artwork.

“This was where our relationship with dealers really came in,” says Tanya. “They would hold back certain pictures to give us a good choice, which is how we came to accumulate such an eclectic collection; from oils to abstract, etchings, line drawings and copper engravings.”

Being able to acquire so many splendid pieces tapped into the other thing they love about old furniture – it’s eco-credentials. “Antiques are very environmentally-friendly,” says Tanya. “If you buy them you are investing in the future by recycling the past.”

Their job, she says, is to help home and business owners see the value of acquiring these solid and distinctive pieces. “You don’t have to turn your workplace or home into a museum, sometimes one good piece is all that’s needed,” she says. This could be a sideboard for a dining or eating area, a few side tables, or a statement mirror for a hall.

So, given that no less an authority than The Economist magazine practically announced the death of brown furniture in an influential article on the antiques trade in October 2015, why are we seeing this resurgence of interest?

Mia believes that period dramas like Downton Abbey have played a quiet part. “We can’t be the only people who spend most of the time looking at the rooms not the actors.”

Another influence is the The Pig and Hotel du Vin chains, designed by Hampshire-based Robin and Judy Hutson. Their slightly shabby, comfortable country house atmosphere – with taxidermy, velvet and leather club chairs and dark wood furniture, has not gone unnoticed, says Tanya. Mia was asked by one client to



Previous page: Antiques hunters Tanya Knight (left) and Mia Preston

Top: Vintage toboggans and ice-skating boots will spice up winter shop displays

Left: A peacock-blue Chesterfield sofa and antique sideboard are signature Bowden Knight finds

Below: One of their convex mirror collections. The metallic look is referenced in the modern lampshade on the vintage standard base

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design his New Forest holiday home ‘taking inspiration from The Pig at Brockenhurst’.

The new trend for darker, warmer paint colours – Farrow and Ball’s Down Pipe is still selling and Pantone’s 2017 colours include Kale, a definite, darker green, plus a denim blue – is also an indicator of a taste shift.

“Old gilt mirrors and wooden frames stand out so well against these positive colours, and so does antique furniture,” says Mia.

They’ll be spending 2017 helping clients tap into this new look but have plenty of advice and tips for Hampshire Life readers who want to dip a toe into the New Old: “Standard lamps and mirrors are very popular first buys,” says Mia. “They introduce the look but aren’t too dominant. Club chairs are great, too, but need carefully looking at underneath – you don’t want to sit on them and hit the floor!”

If you brave an auction, says Tanya, “Take someone with you. Two heads are better than one, to either stop you getting carried away or help prevent the overwhelm that can come, leaving you unable to decide what to bid on.”

Both advise measuring – not just the area in which you wish to place a new piece but also entrances to your home and the piece itself. “We all make the size mistake at some point,” says Tanya, who also advises to have a back-up plan. “If you’re buying something for the dining room, for instance, have an alternative place it could be placed in, just in case.”

Neither agrees with trying to beat down dealers: “Ask them for their best price but they know what they paid for something and what an item’s worth,” says Mia.

But their biggest tip of all is to take that leap of faith. “We see it time and again with our clients,” says Mia. “They try something new and are amazed by the way a lovely old piece adds character and depth to their home or business and, best of all, it’s unique.”

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