

History of Penman Antiques Fairs and Caroline Penman's career.



Caroline Penman (nee Filmer) was at the age of 9 determined to be an antiques dealer. This was prompted by moving house from a modern home in Reigate, to a Tudor house in Lindfield, W Sussex. She and her parents went to shops, auctions and houses open to the public, to learn about the right furnishings for such a home. She found that she could remember facts while her elders forgot them. Gradually double history lessons took over from sports at school, and her knowledge of social history and associated artefacts grew, concentrating on the 18th century.

In her school holidays she worked in the local good antique shop in Lindfield, then **Brighton Fair** came into Caroline's life, and she worked for the directors of Cultural Exhibitions Ltd, in 1959. Every July thereafter she was at the Brighton Fair (which was a very social event), working for Reg Wilkinson (glass) for 3 years, before taking a stand of her own.

Caroline left school at 16 and soon she secured a part time apprenticeship at Eric Seldon's Eastbourne antiques shop. Here she hoovered and dusted and handled Dr Wall Worcester, netsukes and learned a very traditional style of dealing. She started buying, with the £2,000 left to her by her grandmother. 18 months later a shop came up for sale in Lindfield High Street, just 150yds from her parents house. This was duly bought and converted, and at the age of 18 Caroline opened her own "**Lindfield Antiques**" shop. Dealing mainly in glass and furniture at first, she progressed through the different disciplines, aiming at trade buyers of good quality, relatively academic pieces. When VAT started (was it 1973?) Caroline sold her shop, being put off by the prospect of special scheme book-keeping for the fast turnover that she was maintaining.

Meanwhile, Caroline started the first village hall fair, at **Lindfield**, in 1967. At that time there were the smart fairs - Grosvenor House, Chelsea, Kensington & Brighton; then there were some large unstandfitted fairs - including one at the Corn Exchange, Brighton, run by local dealer Winifred Usher. Lindfield Fair worked well, so she went on to run a Fair at the Martlets Hall, Burgess Hill from '68 to '71.

In 1969 she married a Royal Engineer, Richard Penman, who was rapidly bought out of the army, and became involved in dealing (in model engines & tin toys), and together they organised the fairs. Caroline and Richard were showing at Brighton and Kensington Fairs and the fairs dealing side of their business proceeded, showing at other fairs around the country, including the South West fairs run by Gerry Mosdell and the North West ones run by Noel Gibson and Sue Brownson - using an American RV as a base (great fun!)

Then, in 1972, at the **Ardingly Showground**, Caroline started a legend! For the first few years, there was one building, with 62 exhibitors. At one end of the hall, 20 of these stands were 100 years datelined. However, it became clear that quantity rather than quality was the rule, and the dateline was dropped. Instead, a new idea dawned - outside the hall there could be dealers selling from their cars! This was duly advertised, with "sell from your car at £1 per day". There were 5 cars. At the next fair there were 30. Then 90. Then 200 (and the price had soared to £5, with vans at £8). When all this started, there were no "car boot fairs", and the only equivalent was at Brimfield, in the States. The years passed, and by 1984 there were 4 fairs a year, with April & September fairs having around 800 outside pitches and 200 indoor stands in 4 buildings. The Trade were kept out till the allotted time on Wednesday morning, making a real buzz - but a nightmare for Caroline and her security men! Sadly those days are over!

In the meanwhile, Caroline & Richard bought "**The National Collectors Fair**" from Eric Gamlin (for £250), which successfully ran at the Cumberland Hotel for 3 or 4 years. However, the newly built Kensington Town Hall was looking tempting, and various dealers (especially Rosey Ford of Serendipity in Ledbury) were urging Caroline to start a new, properly datelined but "accessible" fair. So the **West London Antiques Fair** was born, in 1976 - at first in January, then also in August. This flourished and enlarged gradually to fill the 3 floors of Kensington Town Hall - with 90 stands at one stage.

In 1979, Penman Fairs were experimenting with other venues, hoping to emulate Ardingly's success. Shepton Mallet was the most successful of these. However, it was too far from the Penman home in Sussex to be promoted personally. In 1982 (or was it '83?) a close friend, David Stroud, married Anne, who was an inveterate organiser, so the **Shepton Mallet Fair** was their wedding present. It had been a July event, with 200 pitches in the main ring, and only 30 or so indoor stands. The Strouds, as "Merlin Fairs" progressed and enlarged the fair immeasurably, till they sold out to DMG in 1995. As an employee of DMG, **Sue Ede** (now Cooper Fairs) ran Shepton, Ardingly and Newark - what a responsibility!

Other venues were tried briefly by Penmans - **Epsom Racecourse, Camberley, Thruxton and Biggleswade** airfields - but none caught on, and were all dropped after 2 or 3 fairs.

In 1980 Roger Heath Bullock (who had bought Cultural Exhibitions Ltd from Beryl Davey, Geoffrey Van and Vera Bird) offered the **Brighton Fair** to Caroline, who obviously was keen to buy, it being her most local fair, and the one on which she had cut her teeth! But in January 1981 husband Richard had a bad traffic accident, leaving him in a coma for nearly 6 months. So Caroline forged ahead alone, (whilst visiting Richard in hospital twice a day)

In 1984, the **Chelsea Antiques Fair** was offered for sealed tender, following the death of the former organiser, Josephine Graham Ballin. A successful bid of £36,000 secured Chelsea, and the first Penman Chelsea Antiques Fair was therefore in September 1984, at the same time as Ardingly! Running two such diverse types of fair proved to be almost impossible. So, as Chelsea and the London fairs seemed to dominate, Ardingly was sold for £10,000 at the end of 1985 to Geoff Whitacker, who had recently started Newark, on similar lines (but larger than Ardingly). Subsequently Geoff sold his whole stable to the Daily Mail Group who eventually took on Sue Ede to oversee all these fairs.

In 1986 Donald Newby started the **Westminster Antiques Fair** at the Horticultural Halls, in December. After two reasonably successful years, the fair nearly died, and Caroline picked up the pieces. Westminster limped along, being successful for some exhibitors, but an enjoyable disaster for others. Eventually, at the end of 1994, it was dropped, with some reluctance, as the venue was very pleasant - but had no passing trade.

In 1987 Caroline was approached by **Raymond Gubbay**, with an eye to starting a fair in the Barbican, where he held many of his concerts. This was initially designed to balance the West London Antiques Fair, as the **City of London Antiques Fair**. This partnership worked well, and despite low ceilings etc, the fair established itself successfully in December '87. For 1988, David Walker was brought into the partnership, and the fair enlarged to both halls of the Barbican, with an Art fair in the other hall. However, at this point, Telegraph Events were negotiating to buy the fair along with the Gubbay group of concerts. So, Caroline

& David were asked to sell their share in the City Fair. Subsequently Telegraph events/Raymond Gubbay ran the fair at the Barbican, then it moved, and was sold to the Business Design Centre, where it ran for 2 years.

Meanwhile **Lindfield Fair** was a little village hall fair, unlike any other Penman Fair, so was given to Ron Beech (Staffordshire pottery dealer from Hove, who subsequently bought Tony Keniston's group of Fairs)

1989 was a busy year, when Barbara Bell joined the Penman fold. A fair in **Hong Kong** was attempted, as part of "Britain in Hong Kong Show" (fun but expensive for all concerned!) The "**Period Home Shows**" were tried, in Brighton, Chester and Cheltenham. Only **Chester** caught on, and it is the highly successful Northern-most Penman Fair, now on 3 floors, with 50 dealers.

So, in 1990 Caroline had the Chelsea & West London fairs, plus Brighton and Chester. But Brighton sadly fell by the wayside as the town waned in quality. Eventually this was given up, and replaced by **Barkham Manor** in 1992 - a beautiful barn in a vineyard, just 10 mins drive from the Penman home. Too small on its own, but with a marquee, it offered a welcome break for quality oak dealers and collectors - and in 1996& 7, for art dealers too.

In late 1993 the **Kensington Antiques Fair**, run by Roger Heath Bullock (Cultural Exhibitions Ltd), was offered for tender through the ATG. Both Caroline and dealer Terry Gasson were interested, and decided to buy it together. Thus the annual Kensington fair, in late October/early November was added to the repertoire. It was rejuvenated, and run successfully with 3 differently datelined floors in 1994 and 1995. For '96 it had have the top floor devoted to Art.

In 1993 Caroline was approached by the Honourable Artillery Company, to run an antiques fair in their tent, on their 5 acre field in the middle of the **City of London**. Thinking that the 1992 recession would soon be over, extravagant plans were laid for a 100-stand fair in July 1995. This would be a very high profile, expensive event. It turned out to be a non-runner, and was cancelled in January 1995. The rest of that year was hard for organisers and exhibitors alike, and Caroline had been tempted to sell out. However, 30 years of entrepreneurship buoyed her up, despite the fact that there were too many fairs chasing too few exhibitors and too few buyers! So, a new venture was conceived - **Penman Art Fairs**, where there seemed to be much more room for expansion.

So, in 1996, as well as the antiques fairs, there were 2 London and 4 country **Art Fairs**. The first, the **Chelsea Art Fair**, was a roaring success, but the country ones (in a tent behind the Swan at Testworth, Winchester Town Hall, a lovely pub on the A40 near Cheltenham) proved less successful. However, the Hon Artillery Company venue was re-vamped, and in October the Armoury House was host to "**The City of London Art Fair**". This continued for 3 years. In 1998, after 2 years of successful Art Fair in the City, and Antiques version was added, the week after the art fair. However, this did not inspire enough City folk, and both fairs were abandoned.

In 1997 a planned prestigious event at Ascot Racecourse nearly came to fruition, but the financial climate made its launch too risky, so the idea was postponed & abandoned when subsequently Robert Bailey tried a fair there. In 1997, the summer version of **West London Antiques Fair** was sold to P&O Events, who were launching The Great Antiques Fair at Earls Court 2 over the same dates in August.

1998 saw the loss of Barkham Manor (known as the "**Sussex Oak & Country Antiques and Art Fair**"), as the Manor was sold privately. Caroline searched for a local replacement....

In 1999 another Art Fair was started, by Caroline in partnership with Duncan & Jacki Philips (who handled Penman Advertising & PR) - the **West of England Art Fair** in the Pavilion at Bath, in May - just when Caroline's hip was stopping her from getting about, so she missed the event, delegating her presence to Barbara Bell, her stalwart right hand. Sadly this did not take off, despite looking really smart. It was repeated in 2000, with hopes of improvement, but without success - so was dropped

In 1999 a nearly local-to-home Fair was started at **Lingfield Racecourse**, in May, and due to be repeated in October. However, Caroline had a sudden deterioration in her hip, which caused a hip replacement operation in September, thus the October Lingfield Racecourse and City of London Art Fairs were cancelled to allow her some recuperation time.

The 21st Century:

In 2000 Penmans bought **Petersfield Antiques Fair** (3 per year) from Heather Gamlin, widow of Eric Gamlin who launched Petersfield in 1973, (also Farnham, Lymington and the National Collectors Fair originally in the Horticultural Halls, then the Cumberland Hotel). This cosy little fair in unpretentious surroundings has gone from strength to strength, and is Penmans' most popular venue!

Now fully recovered from her hip replacement in Sept 1999, Caroline was rearing to go again, by mid 2000, she launched into a major publicity campaign for **Chelsea Antiques Fair's 50th anniversary**. This revived the reputation of Chelsea, and put it firmly on the map as England's most revered & traditional fair - even Grosvenor House has given up datelines, but Chelsea retained a pre-Victorian Furniture - uniquely - and successfully!

An autumn 2000 **Chester Antiques Fair** was established in late October, to balance the February event, and the Kensington Fair moved from late October to August, re-assuming that slot laid vacant by the Earls Court Fair's move to October. However, the combined forces of Penman & Gasson were no match for August in London and the summer fair was finally laid to rest.

More aggressive marketing has proved a powerful tool, both making all the fairs successful for exhibitors, and therefore for filling the stands. This success prompted Caroline to take up the offer of a slot in the calendar of the Bath Pavilion for November 2001, when she launched the first **Penman Bath Antiques Fair** - fully booked by June, and with great hopes for success! The fair was assembled and looked fantastic. Despite the best efforts of a really professional PR team, Parker Harris, and much pushing from the Penman office, it was a dismal flop! Not to be repeated - much to Caroline's mortification!

In August 2001, looking at the tents in the **Royal Hospital Chelsea**, setting up for Decorex, Caroline applied to run an Antiques Fair on the grounds - akin to the Flower Show. To her astonishment, this proved possible, and great plans were laid for a prestigious big new Fair, to rival Olympia! However, 80 years' of Flower Show had squashed the ground so badly that it would no longer drain off rainwater till something major was done deep in the earth. After much falsely raised hope, the project was shelved. Since then the ground has apparently miraculously recovered, and is now used regularly! Galling!

2002: The Golden **Jubilee Petersfield Antiques Fair** was the last June Petersfield, always having been weaker than February and September. Therefore the two are now much stronger.

After an approach by the Administrator of Hoghton Tower in Preston, there was the **Hoghton Tower Fine Art & Antiques Fair** in late June - planned for 40 stands, but only 20 sold, so a great loss there! (and no more Hoghton Tower Fairs!)

Then in late July the **Kensington Fine Art & antiques Fair** provided the **first non-datelined fair** since the National Collectors Fair, with "Art & Artefacts from

1600 to 2000" This proved relatively successful, despite a heat-wave and terrible news on the shares front.

Over summer 02, storm clouds of pessimism for the future were banking up so Caroline planned to consolidate and add no new fairs for 2003. In October 02 she gave the exhibitors at Chester fair a pep talk, and convinced herself to forge ahead and brave the storms.

2003 proved challenging, with pep talks to exhibitors 10 minutes before each opening. Chester and Petersfield were very successful, but London is a harder nut to crack. Chelsea had a major re-vamp, with old traditional datelines giving way to later dates. The duration of Chelsea was also reduced from 10 days to 6 days. As the second Gulf War started during the fair, but the event was unexpectedly successful!

2004: Hard marketing work was rewarded by reasonable results, despite low expectations from exhibitors.

No March Chelsea Fair for the first time in 40 years – due to the BADA Antiques Fair's date conflicting.

May saw the **Tythe Barn Experience**, just outside Bicester - idyllic setting, but advertising was not allowed (planning permission), so difficult to fill – not to be repeated

June saw the first **Dulwich Art Fair** – in Dulwich College. A difficult area to market. Repeated in 2005, without success – dropped.

October saw the first **Uckfield Antiques Fair**, our local, at the Civic Centre, which worked moderately, but very successfully for the jewellers!

This was a difficult year for all fairs, especially Olympia, but Penmans are perceived as good value and establishment/reputable.

During summer 04: we hoped to do a 20thC/Deco fair shared with Ann Zierold – looked at Leeds Armouries, Gaydon on M40 and St Georges Hall Liverpool - but after testing the exhibitor water – not popular! Also looked at Highgate Town Hall, no luck.

September saw our first **Bury St Edmunds Fair** - very small, but despite a heatwave, reasonably successful and great fun.

A 3rd member of the team seemed necessary. Applicants included **Louis Aldred**, who worked for us off and on for 3 or 4 years, now works for Arthur Brett in Pimlico. **Stephanie Cripps**, who also worked for us occasionally at fairs, (and worked for Nick Shaw silver) and is now a photographer of antiques. **Ben Miller** from Suffolk, also occasionally works for us, and a friend of Louis Aldred. **James Mudie** – Took him on, full time, but it did not work out and after 6 months we parted.

In 2005 we continued the usual fairs, but sadly at the end of the West London Fair we announced its demise – the cost of the hall rental was becoming prohibitive and un-negotiable.

We brought back March Chelsea, as a lower level "**Kings Road Antiques Fair**" running at the same time as the BADA fair just half a mile away. Successful!

The June Dulwich art fair was our last – poor attendance in too much heat!

August saw the first **Anglian Contemporary Art Fair** at beautiful Cressing Temple nr Braintree – two 14th century barns. Much enjoyed by all – moderate success.

2006: Sadly we did not have a Bury St Edmunds Fair, as the Athenaeum was refurbishing and adding a lift for the first floor.

June: a new venue for the Sussex Fair – we were the first tenants in the brand new glamorous East Sussex National Golf Hotel and Spa, just outside Uckfield. But the world cup and a heatwave did not help!

September celebrated Chelsea's 100th birthday party! Otherwise all as usual

2007 Sussex moved from hot June to October.

The 101st Chelsea Antiques Fair was enhanced to higher standards – looked beautiful, lost money and not to be repeated.

We then tried to sell or give away Chelsea, to no avail!

2008: all as usual, without September Chelsea, but bringing back Bury St Edmunds in April. We also attempted to add a separate Chester Art Fair in the very newly built Pavilion on the Racecourse, but insufficient interest, so abandoned.

2009 has been challenging, but the spring was more successful than expected! We have been joined by Ben Cooper, on a part time basis, for exhibitor liaison and sales and general assistance during fairs – also lowering our average age!
