

HOW TO: BUY SECOND HAND

# First chance at the second hand



Is it still possible to find a bargain at a second-hand shop or have they all been snapped up by Kirstie Allsop disciples? **Jo Nightingale** goes in search of the stylish, the virtuous and the not new

For well over a decade, shabby has been chic when it comes to home furnishings. Inspired by France and Scandinavia's painted furniture and enamel pots and pans the broken-in look has long pervaded the high street, from Laura Ashley and oilcloth queen Cath Kidston to the more affordable Ikea and Next. Then, just when the trend looked like waning, along came TV property guru Kirstie Allsop (presumably keen for a re-brand in the face of the housing crisis) revealing a penchant for the authentically pre-loved and recycled. Why spend high street money on something mass produced and soulless when you can get quality, style and individuality for a lot less, she demanded.

Renovating her Devon retreat with handmade crafts and junk shop gems shipped down from Notting Hill, dirndl-clad Allsop is a persuasive ad for the Channel 4/*Homes and Gardens* take on buying second-hand. But for those of us who live in the real world, without her Portobello Road contacts or an antiques expert handy, surely the dealers have got wise to the trend by now? Can buying up the past really still save us money and deliver greater style and quality than the high street, or has that bird flown?

Moving to a new place was the ideal opportunity for me to put the Allsop approach to the test. Driving through Cheshire just before moving-in day we decided to make a detour to Dagfields Antiques Emporiums near Nantwich, one of several centres

across the region housing numerous traders under one roof. Our needs were specific and urgent: I refused to spend another minute wiping finger and elbow marks off our ten-year-old glass-topped dining table, so it was not going to accompany us to our new life; and my other half, an adherent of the dangerous hobby of whisky tasting, positively couldn't move in without somewhere to put his collection.

Arriving an hour before closing time, we quickly realised that we'd struggle to get round the five large sheds of furnishings, homeware and ornaments. Luckily we hit the most relevant, furniture-focused building first, immediately spotting four 1930s Ercol chairs for a ridiculous £15 each (currently selling online for £125). Nearby, a bow-fronted Art Deco cabinet was crying out to house my *Alice in Wonderland* book collection, soon to be evicted from a built-in unit – at £120 it was less than half the price of similar pieces seen in London and Brighton.

Many of the goods at Dagfields don't pass the 100 years old rule that officially defines an antique but, moving to a 1920s property and with a taste for the modern, that was fine by us. It was much more than fine, in fact, and with the clock ticking an excited panic set in as we flitted from stall to stall. Across the hall at least four suitable wooden dining tables awaited our attention; we could happily have taken any of them home but a classic 1930s drop-leaf number, in polished oak so pristine as to look

## Hints for successful second-hand shopping

Buy things you like, not that you think will gain value

**If you want to use homeware items make sure they're in good condition, without chips or cracks**

Look out for woodworm holes in old furniture

**Use your imagination – could you give it a lick of paint, disguise scratches or replace the upholstery?**

Buy a guide like the Pocket Book of British Ceramic Marks if you want to know age and maker

**Make the vendor an offer – most are happy to haggle.**

**Buying several items from one place can get you a good total price**

If you want it snap it up – there's usually only one of each item

**Stick to your budget and don't get carried away with items you don't need**

Remember that most items over 20 years old may not be dishwasher-proof