

Off the roadshow

Piers Ford talks to Bunny Campione, who reveals a love of the outdoors and a pride at being an Essex girl

When Bunny Campione calls herself a blonde 'Essex girl' she's only telling the truth. But to those of us who are used to seeing her dispensing expert advice and valuations on the *Antiques Roadshow*, it's just a little startling, as if we ought to be looking beyond the discrete pearls and soigné silk scarf for white stilettos and possibly an ankle bracelet.

In the event, there's no need to worry. That beautifully modulated accent – once instantly identified in the dark by a London cabbie who fancied himself an antique dealer manqué – carries no trace of the estuary. And although relaxed and dressed in her preferred off duty clothes, a fleece and practical jeans, she retains the authoritative poise honed by a long and successful career in the antiques business.

But an Essex girl she is, having grown up there and lived for some time in a mill house on the River Colne between Sible and Castle Hedingham, inherited from her mother. Today, when she isn't travelling with the *Roadshow* or pursuing her other interests as an antiques consultant and public speaker, she lives quietly with her husband, the conservationist and antiquarian bookseller Major Iain Grahame, at Daws Hall, the environmental education centre and nature reserve that nestles on the Essex/Suffolk border at Lamarsh, not far from Sudbury.

She is delighted to be Treasurer of the Daws Hall Trust, which has helped the sanctuary evolve into an important nature resource for schools in the area. And perhaps because it chimes so closely with a childhood love of the outdoors, you sense that it gives her as much pleasure as anything, even the discovery of a rare doll or Steiff teddy bear. Leaving is always a wrench.

"People do think that I'm always dressed in pearls, but actually I'm much happier as I am now, going about with animals and birds, particularly," she says. "It's always lovely to arrive back from London, get out of the car and hear the birds singing in all the greenery. It just envelops you. You do have to steel yourself to go back and 'perform'. Here, I don't have to dress up at all."

She loves being close to the River Stour. "When I was on the Colne, I was in charge of the sluice gates," she recalls. "I remember going down in my nightie one stormy night and opening them up to let the river gush through. It was very exciting. I brought my boys up there and I was never worried about them falling in the water! I was much more worried about the corner around the mill

which some young men in their fast cars took far too quickly. And this is a lovely part of Essex."

So there's another startling image to conjure with: Bunny Campione battling the elements in the middle of the night! But we really shouldn't be surprised. This is the daughter of an aerobatics teacher who would often take her up in his Tiger Moth and her uncle was that silver screen king of derring-do, Stewart Granger. An adventurous spirit has been one of the keys to professional success that was foretold in a pleasingly unconventional manner.

"When I was young, I went with a girlfriend to see a palmist in Castle Hedingham, just for fun," she says. "He said I would have a very interesting career, that I would travel a lot and that I'd be surrounded by faces although they wouldn't belong to people. They'd be like porcelain plates, but three-dimensional. I wasn't working at that point and frankly had no idea that dolls could be made of porcelain, and I thought no more about it until I was asked to start the doll department at Sotheby's in 1980. I remember the first time I catalogued for an auction: there was a small cupboard, and all these faces were sitting looking at me. I suddenly thought, 'the palmist!' It was a bit creepy."

Although she is technically one of the *Roadshow's* 'Miscellaneous' experts, Bunny is best known for her advice on dolls and teddies. Before she established the doll department at Sotheby's, they had traditionally been included in the furniture catalogues. The first teddy bear auction followed in 1982, again under her guidance. The sales captured the public imagination as people realised that something that they'd always taken for granted as children, and then consigned to the attic or the cupboard, could actually be worth money.

"A teddy bear looks sad, doesn't answer back, is cuddly and somehow comforting, and it makes money!" she explains. "Of course, the ones that weren't cuddled make money now because they still have their fur. That's the sad thing about toys: it's only the ones that haven't been played with, and are probably still in their boxes, which have been put in the attic, perhaps because a child died. So it's a misnomer to say that playthings make money. It's the unplayed-with playthings that make money."

Through the 1980s, teddy bear auction prices played leapfrog. "When I started the auctions, everybody, including the directors at Sotheby's, laughed at me and said I was mad," says Bunny. "But I think the first record price was £460, and every three months I'd



Bunny Campione: "It's always lovely to arrive back from London, get out of the car and hear the birds singing in all the greenery."

Photo: Hans Verhmoet © The Journals

have a new world record. So from that point of view they've gone from strength to strength. Now, they're steady."

Her success with the doll and teddy bear auctions led directly to an invitation to join the experts on the *Antiques Roadshow* in 1985 and she's been a regular face on Sunday evening television ever since. She's grateful for the opportunities it has created, but points out that her professional experience embraces far more than toys.

Her first job was with an Oxford modern art gallery in the 1960s, from where she joined Sotheby's on the main reception counter. It started her on a learning curve that allowed her to develop a breadth of knowledge which simply wouldn't be possible for young people in a similar position today, when specialisation is de rigueur.

"I went into silver, for example, and learned all the hallmarks, but it wasn't tactile enough for me," she says. "Then I went across to furniture. I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time. In the 1960s, a woman wasn't going to be given the title of 'furniture expert,' it was considered an unfeminine subject! But as dolls and automata were included in the furniture catalogues I got interested in them and I was lucky because they eventually said I'd learned enough to open a department."

She says she quickly developed an instinct for spotting something special, and her philosophy is to exploit that to its full

potential. "As each area came along, I threw myself into it," she remembers.

"I do believe the early bird catches the worm. I'd get to work at 7am, and it paid off. I worked extremely hard, even at weekends. Looking back, I was very American in that respect. As the only woman, I used to be pretty good at estimating in the furniture department. They'd say a card table, for example, looked similar to one sold for so many pounds last year, so they'd estimate that amount. I'd say that it had something extra, was more beautiful and would go for more. And time after time I was right. Perhaps it's a woman's aesthetic sense."

While she loves dolls and teddies, Bunny's greatest passion is for pre-Victorian furniture, particularly miniatures: apprentice pieces and cabinet makers' samples. "I think they're amazing," she says. "Just to feel that wonderful wizened wood, looked after and polished. It's very tactile and sensual. My philosophy is that something should have three things: you must love to look at it, it should be useful, and it should appreciate in value. Furniture, to me, meets those criteria. But I always say, buy what you like, not what you think will rise in value. The chances are that if you've got good taste, it will rise because everybody else will want it too."

Bunny enjoys some of the aspects of television exposure. Professionally, it's been helpful. People trust her expertise. She's been recognised everywhere, from the local supermarket, to a French mountaintop when her ski suit proved a poor disguise, and the tennis courts at Hurlingham. But she doesn't mind. *Roadshow* fans are a friendly lot.

Bunny left Sotheby's in 1988, but continued her relationship with the auction house as a consultant, and has fulfilled a similar role with Christie's since 1996. All this alongside running her own company, Campione Fine Art, which gives her plenty of opportunity to continue learning.

"You never stop," she says. "You get to the point where you think you know a lot, but a true expert should never be afraid to say they don't know something. And yes, we do see things on the *Roadshow* that we don't know!"

As a child, her father taught her not to be afraid of nature, and she would feed wasps with strawberry jam on her finger. These days at Daws Hall, it's the bees that keep her grounded although she now wears protective gear to tend them.

"I'm thrilled to be able to help my husband keep bees because they are the most fascinating, enigmatic living creatures," she says. "I admire them and respect them enormously. And I know it sounds silly, but we do tell them when we're going away."

It doesn't sound silly at all, just another unexpectedly unconventional element in a diverse life. And she still has one more surprise in store. As Bunny Campione prepares to pose for some photographs, she recalls some good old show business advice she was given by television presenter Jilly Goolden, with disarming frankness. "You have to remember three Ts when you're having your picture taken: teeth, tits and tum." Well, we are in Essex, after all. □