



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

Going, going, gone! An ill-fitting jersey sold to a tight head prop plastered on unlimited free port

THIS year is already filling up in my diary with bookings for after-dinner speeches, presentations and charity auctions.

Yes, I am an auctioneer; not a trained auctioneer but I have copied friends who are professionals and have managed to help to raise quite a bit of money over the years for good causes. In the coming weeks I will be employed at a local council, a ladies' charity and a dreaded rugby club event. I say dreaded because that is possibly the worst social occasion in which to try and keep discipline but over the last 25 years of bringing down the hammer on items there have been some golden moments and some real lows. This week I thought I'd let you into those momentous occasions and it will act as a kind of therapy for me.

The strangest items I have had to sell are thus... two tons of kiln dried firewood, which the donor had brought with him to the hotel, a commando dagger to actor Henry Cavill... what would Superman need a knife for? ... a bottomless blow-dry... and six straws of bull semen.

The latter was at an auction near South Molton and my guest for the evening was a television producer from London. His mouth fell open when I announced the agricultural item and it dropped open again when I brought the hammer down for a considerable sum.

"It's a Devon thing," I said. "You wouldn't understand it." He still mentions it at dinner parties and family gatherings. However, to this day I am unsure what a bottomless blow dry is!

Things that have gone wrong. On one particular occasion I started to auction the raffle prizes and then had to ask for them back. Another springs to mind when the organiser, who had never done a raffle before, sold all the book of tickets and placed both sides of the strips into the bucket!

But by far the best was in the days of photocopier toner when I was handed a valuation sheet which was showing signs of premature fading. Item number four was a watch, a Patek Philippe something or other... I do not own a watch and had never heard of Mr Philippe or his watch making business. I looked at the reserve and

it said £360 and thus started low at £100. The room was as ill-informed as I was and seemed surprised when one individual took the bidding to £380 very quickly. I brought the hammer down and moved on, thinking that £380 was not a bad price. Afterwards it was pointed out to me that the last zero on the estimate had not come out in copying. The reserve was £3,600. The bidder had paid and vanished.

And so, to a dreaded rugby club which will remain nameless. I turned up and discovered that the event had been sponsored by a local wine importer who had thought it a kind gesture to place unlimited free port on each table. Several guests were already in the recovery position, one was asleep in his cheese and biscuits. The first few items had gone slowly but without the need for police back-up but then a medium size cycling jersey came up. A hand shot into the air, a hand belonging to the club's recently retired tight head prop.

"I've just taken up cycling," he said. I looked at the man who was a good foot shorter than me and four stone heavier and wondered if the term 'just' had meant that morning.

This series of large circles was determined to get the shirt which I reminded him on three occasions was medium! Some £35 later he was a happy man and ripped open the bag only to discover, as the whole room had guessed, it did not fit him, in fact he could not get it over his head. Several of his old teammates stepped forward to help and a small maul ensued.

"Never in a month of Sundays, even if we use butter are we going to get that shirt on," I pointed out rather unkindly.

That was the wrong thing to say because a minute later several dishes of butter were passed from the tables around him, his head thickly greased and the shirt was pulled down coming to rest on his chest looking like some sort of bizarre sports bra. He had to be cut out of it a little later as he had gone a funny colour.

Several years ago, in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral I was asked to host a charity auction in a sparkling hotel with a myriad of guests from



Charity event auctioneer Fitz has managed to help raise quite a bit of money over the years for good causes



show biz. Jack Dee and Harry Hill were sitting in front of me and I was flanked by Bernard Cribbins and some other members of the old Carry On team.

There were the usual items such as signed cricket bats, vastly expensive holidays and crates of champagne, and all went for good prices. Then came two tickets for any Tim Rice musical at any London venue. They started slowly and I tried to inject a little humour by adding that if you were fed up with the music of Tim

Rice, I could get them swapped for The Krankies, who were appearing in Torquay, just as entertaining ...

There was an intake of breath from most of the room but laughter from my left. I glanced over and Sir Tim, smiling, wagged his finger at me. It did teach me to always check the guest list.

If auctions are stressful, raffles are worse. There will always be someone who wins twice or three times and the raffle where you choose the prize yourself will always have that

difficult end decision. As the last tickets are pulled, do you go for the knitted ballerina toilet roll cover or the bottle of Ouzo Uncle Barry brought back from Spain in 1976!

But if the organiser chooses the prizes that can go very wrong as well. I have witnessed Peter Vosper, main motor dealer of the South West, win a full MOT and service from an opposition garage. A year's worth of haircuts went to a friend who barely has eyebrows and a 20-minute flight in a Cessna went to a former group captain from RAF Strike Command.

The finest, however, was a charity who were desperate for money and managed to get a prize from the Royal Navy which offered spending a day at sea. A fresh faced sub lieutenant arrived with the paperwork and asked me if I could get £2,000 for the experience. That was passed within minutes as I had an auctioneer's dream unfolding in front of me... two punters who were not going to back down from each other. As £4,000 came up, the room got quieter... £5,000... you could hear a cockroach cough, £6,000, £9,000 and £11,000 passed with occasional loud intakes of breath. The hammer came down at £13,500 to an explosion of noise! The winner was overcome, as was his wife. I jumped down from the stage and shook their hands and turning to the lady, I said: "You're off to sea."

With tears of emotion in her eyes she replied: "I wanted a new kitchen."