

These women found that with one foot in the past, they're creating a fabulous future

Our love affair with VINTAGE

'We cross the Channel in search of treasure'

Kate Taylor, 55, lives in Lingfield, Surrey, with her husband Garry.

There's nothing like a weekend break for blowing away the cobwebs and getting a new perspective on life. But our road trips to Belgium are about more than that – they are the basis of our new family business.

It all started in the summer of 2014, when my dear parents passed away. My brother John Plumpton and I had been caring for them into their nineties and, when we emptied the house, we decided to sell some of their old furniture, along with bric-a-brac – like china, glass and a barometer – on a stall at a local antiques fair near their home in Bournemouth.

My husband Garry joined us, and we all enjoyed working on the stall so much

that we decided to take it a step further by visiting Belgium, where Garry's mother's family are from, as we knew it would be a great place to source more items to sell.

On our first trip to Brussels and Ghent in November 2014, the three of us loved hunting for local flea markets. We returned with the car so stuffed full of items that we had to wrap objects in tissue paper and balance them on our knees. It was so much fun and we were thrilled when we found that we could sell almost everything we'd brought home.

Inspired, we took on a VW van in February 2015, calling it Dora after our beloved mum. Since then, we've been travelling to Belgium every few months to enjoy a few days of adventure and to pick up more finds. John does the driving and we stay in B&Bs along the way.

We've got a tin of euros and usually spend the equivalent of about £1,000 each trip. Once we've filled up Dora with stock, that's it!

Many of the traders speak English, so striking a deal isn't too hard. We visit markets, big and small – anywhere there are bargains to be had – and have a pen and paper to hand for negotiations, as well as an app on our phone, so we can calculate euro conversions quickly.

Once we're back home, we set up a stall at fairs in Petworth (famous for its antique shops), Cowdray Park and Hever Castle, and The Decorative Living Fair in Eridge, among others. The smaller shows

cost up to £75 for a stall, and bigger ones can cost £200. We love the banter and chats we have with other stallholders; the whole atmosphere is really fun.

We decorate the stall with French road signs, so that people know we have French and Belgian products, and display the name of our business, Etoile Brocante, on a large sign. We also make sure we source some big items to make the stall look good.

We're learning more about what sells and what doesn't. The enormous stuffed pike we bought on an early trip made a great talking point and got people to the stall, but no one wanted to buy it! Better sellers are salon chairs, French-style mirrors that we refurbish, and jackets that I embellish with vintage buttons.

I soon discovered that by upcycling some of our wares, I instantly made them more attractive to buyers. Many of the frames and furniture come in dark wood that isn't fashionable these days, so I hit upon the idea of customising them, painting them pale grey and cream so that they fit better in modern homes.

I'm thrilled when something I've given some love and attention is given a new lease of life – just as our business has done for us! We're not making a fortune from it, and are currently reinvesting everything we make back into stock, but the three of us have found a fabulous new shared passion.

• etoilebrocante.co.uk ➔

'By upcycling some of our wares, I instantly made them more attractive to buyers'



KATE'S TIPS

- When displaying items, give them space. If there is too much clutter, people get confused.
- If you're travelling to source stock, have an idea of what you hope to purchase before you go, and don't buy on a whim.



John (left), Kate and Garry with their finds