

Thriller of a viewing

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Secret superstar buyers, risky gambles and sky-high boom-time bidding . . . it's all part of the job for one estate agent

When, in 2006, Michael Jackson spent a summer holed up in Ireland, the late megastar singer did some house hunting. Pat O'Hagan, an auctioneer with Savills, was in charge of the sale of the historic Ardbraccan House, an 18th-century Palladian mansion on 120 acres, outside Navan in Co Meath.

He received a call to say an anonymous celebrity wanted to view the estate, which was owned by the late English film producer Sarah Lawson. O'Hagan was asked to clear the estate of all staff for the star's arrival.

He arrived at Ardbraccan on a damp September morning to discover that a bough had fallen from a tree at the front of the house. The sound of an electric saw prompted him to investigate and he found an elderly man, who said: "The owner knows that when a branch comes down I always come and cut it up." O'Hagan had to convince him that it wasn't necessary.

"I said, 'if you meet any cars on the avenue, just keep going, and returned to the house. Moments later, a Volkswagen van with blacked-out windows pulled up and Michael Jackson got out. He didn't have a silly hat, or silly glasses, or a mask or gloves.

"He spent the day at the house, and he was very nice and very mannerly. He told us a lot about himself and about his difficult childhood. He really opened up. The kids were extremely well mannered, and they had a picnic while they were at the house." In the end, Jackson did not buy Ardbraccan, which eventually went to American businessman Charles Noell in 2013.

O'Hagan, 58, kept the secret of the star's visit for a long time, but it remains a highlight of his 40-year auctioneering career, which has been spent mostly with the same company.

The son of a veterinarian and a nurse, O'Hagan grew up in Dundalk, in Co Louth. He decided to train as an auctioneer with Dublin firm Hamilton & Hamilton. He recalls arriving at the company's offices at No 15 Molesworth Street, in October 1976, on the back of a Honda 50 motorcycle, one of three new young recruits.

Hamilton & Hamilton, a small business, sold fine art, furniture and grand homes. "You were a jack of all trades. We'd have to deliver post on our bikes; we were porters and cataloguers," says O'Hagan. "When we were selling houses in the country, the whole office would move down for two or three days. There was great camaraderie."

In 1980, after attending evening classes, he became a qualified auctioneer. His first sale was a little bungalow in Donard, in Co Wicklow, which sold for about IR£19,000 (€24,000).

It would be eight years, though, before he stood up with a gavel to perform his first auction — the sale of a two-storey semi-detached cottage between Drogheda and Slane. “Hugh Hamilton always did the auctions, and was supposed to do it that day, but made a surprise announcement to me just before the event. I was very nervous but the property sold for around £16,000.”

His first decade in property went well until the bottom fell out of the market in the mid-1980s. “It was a bad time. Some of the directors of Osborne King & Megran, who were based across the road at No 32 Molesworth Street, got together and started to chat about putting the two firms together.

“We were a niche high-end residential, country and fine art firm and they were focused on the commercial side of the business, but it worked and we became Hamilton Osborne King.”

The newly formed company survived the tough times when it was tasked with selling off 33 H Williams stores after the supermarket chain collapsed. Country estates were O’Hagan’s bread and butter over the past 40 years, however, and he has helped to sell some of Ireland’s largest country mansions and estates.

Among them was Straffan House, in Co Kildare, these days better known as the K Club, which he has sold three times. He also secured a deal for Middleton Park House with the professional gambler Barney Curley, who raffled it in 1984. O’Hagan was then enlisted by the winners — an English syndicate — to sell the property again. Other big sales have included the Hollywoodrath estate in Co Dublin, owned by former Rod Stewart manager Billy Gaff and in 1989 An Grianan farm, on 3,000 acres in Donegal.

There were some bold moves such as his push to auction Ri na Furria, a 60-acre estate in Co Kerry in the 1980s, which meant taking a gamble rather than selling it on the open market. “I flew to the office of our joint agent in London to have a conference call with the vendors’ Swiss solicitor, because we didn’t have the technology to have a conference call in Ireland,” O’Hagan says. “Anybody coming to the auction had to hand over a bank draft of £100,000 to get in the door. It was risky.

“About six or seven interested parties showed up and John Finnegan, of Finnegan Menton auctioneers, bought it for a client. He was always one of these people you’d love to see in your auction room because he never wasted time, he was going to buy.”

There have been hairy moments, too, such as the time the main bidder at an auction was a determined but drunk businessman. “I did my best not to sell it to him, but he was so vociferous it was impossible not to. He won the auction, but wasn’t able to complete the deal and it eventually went to the underbidder.”

In the 1980s, he spent a Sunday showing a German around a property in Sligo. As day turned into night, O’Hagan was convinced that the man was never going to buy. “It wasn’t unusual for tourists to come over, pretend they were interested in a property and enjoy a tour of a grand Irish country house. Nowadays, they buy.

“I put it fairly straight to him and asked did we have a deal? We haggled for over an hour, and eventually he went out to the boot of my car, where I’d left his suitcase, and came back with £100,000 in punts.”

There were many international buyers back then. “In the 1980s when things were pretty hard, we dreamt up advertising slogans: ‘The Swiss are rolling in to our country’ and ‘Germans are fishing for Irish property and advertised in Europe. Today, we depend on the UK for a lot of customers at the top end of the market. During the Celtic tiger they were all trophy buyers.”

By the turn of the century, O’Hagan noticed a shift in the market, as Irish players started to buy up everything around them. In 2006, during the boom, UK firm Savills bought Hamilton Osborne King for €50m. Shortly afterwards, O’Hagan conducted his biggest auction, when, in one day, Savills sold more than €20m worth of property.

“The day started with 135 acres and some hay barns off the N2. We were expecting €3.5m and it made €5.3m. A couple of Dublin homes came up that also made record prices. Then Ballintaggart Stud, on 160 acres, came up. Two people battled it out and bidding went on and up and up, until it got to €13.25m, at which stage I went out and spoke with my vendor. He said it would make more. I can’t divulge what happened, except to say that a week later we sold it for a higher figure.”

In spite of such profits, O’Hagan has bought only two houses over his lifetime and lives in north Dublin. “Selling and buying my homes was stressful. I’ve seen lots of different styles of auctions. Some are very fast, if you don’t bid you’re gone. I tend to give a certain amount of time for people to make their mind up and really squeeze at the end. It’s good fun.”

While he holds the title of head auctioneer and consultant with Savills, he’s presided over few auctions in the past few years. “Since the recession, getting money together in a relatively short time for a country estate auction has become problematic. Auctions might come back. There’s a more balanced financial situation now.”

Who knows whether more celebrity clients are waiting in the wings to view one of his houses? O’Hagan expects plenty more thrillers. He’s not finished selling yet.



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