

LUCY HARPER

————— *Finds*  —————

THE TIME TO TURN UP AT A BOOT SALE, AND WHAT'S ALREADY GONE IF YOU DON'T

Know which hour actually gets you first pick at a car boot
or market, and what's realistically still there if you arrive
later, so you stop guessing and start timing it right.

LUCY HARPER FINDS

I used to think turning up "at some point on Saturday morning" was good enough. It isn't. A boot sale isn't one long stretch of the same stuff sitting there waiting for you. It moves through it in waves, and each wave takes something different off the tables. Arrive at the wrong point in that and you're picking through what nobody else wanted, wondering why everyone keeps telling you boot sales are worth it.

So this is that, written down properly for once. Four windows, what's actually still there in each one, and what you've missed if you turn up after it's gone. It won't tell you which field to go to. It'll tell you what time to be standing in it.

BEFORE THE GATES ARE MEANT TO OPEN

This is the window most people skip because it feels like cheating, or like nobody in their right mind should be up for it. That's rather the point. Sellers are still unloading. Boxes are half out of car boots, blankets aren't down yet, and a fair amount of the best things haven't touched a table at all, they're still sitting in the boot waiting to be lifted out.

If you arrive here, you're not browsing a stall, you're watching someone unpack their whole car and picking things up before they've decided where to put them. It feels a bit odd the first time. You get used to it. Anything with real character, an old tin, a proper wooden box, something with a maker's mark worth a second look, tends to surface here first, because the person selling hasn't had two hours of foot traffic to tell them what it's worth yet.

What's realistically still there: everything. Genuinely, at this point you've missed nothing, because nothing has gone yet. The trade-off is obvious: it's cold, it's early, and half the sellers aren't in the mood to chat.

THE FIRST HOUR AFTER THE GATES OPEN PROPERLY

This is the window everyone means when they say "get there early," and it's the busiest hour for a reason. The blankets are all down now, the tables are set, and this is the only point in the whole morning where you get to see everything laid out at once, before any of it has been picked over.

Anything genuinely unusual moves fast here. Not because it's expensive, most of it isn't, but because there are a lot of eyes on the same tables and everyone's doing the same maths you are. A seller who's been doing this a while will often still have their best pieces near the front of the stall, not tucked away, because they haven't yet worked out what's drawing attention and rearranged around it.



Some mornings the best bit is before anyone else has decided what's worth having.



What's realistically still there: most of it, but the standout pieces, the ones you'd actually stop and tell someone about later, are thinning out. If you've ever had that feeling of seeing something brilliant that someone else is already holding, this is usually the hour it happens in.

MID-MORNING, ONCE THE FIRST RUSH HAS SETTLED

By now the sellers have had a couple of hours to see what people are actually stopping for, and prices start to soften a little on the things that clearly aren't moving. This is a good window if what you want is less about the one perfect find and more about steady, sensible buying, kitchenware, books, things for the garden, the sort of items that were never going to be the first thing snapped up but are still perfectly good.

It's also, honestly, the most pleasant hour to actually be there. The frantic first-hour energy has gone, sellers have time to talk, and you can ask about something without feeling like you're holding up a queue. If a rule of mine matters anywhere, it's here: never leave without finding at least one thing under five pounds, and mid-morning is where that rule earns its keep, because this is when sellers are most open to a fair offer on something they'd rather not pack away again.



What's realistically still there: the dependable stuff, the things that are useful rather than remarkable, plus the odd genuine surprise that got overlooked in the first rush because it wasn't obviously interesting at a glance.

THE LAST HOUR, WHILE THINGS ARE BEING PACKED AWAY

This is a different sort of shopping altogether. Some sellers pack up early if trade's been slow and you won't catch them at all. But the ones who stay have usually decided that taking things home again isn't worth the effort, and that's the honest truth of this window: prices come down not because the thing is worth less, but because nobody wants to lift it back into the car.

I've had some of my better finds here, not because the quality is higher, it generally isn't, but because this is the one point in the morning where a seller will happily let something go for whatever you're offering rather than pack it. It suits patience more than instinct. You're not hunting for the best thing on the table anymore, you're asking what's left and whether anyone still wants it enough to say no to a low offer.



What's realistically still there: whatever didn't sell, which sounds like a downside until you remember that "didn't sell by mid-morning" and "not worth having" are two completely different things. Plenty of what's left here just needed the right person to notice it, later than everyone else did.

THE BIT THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

If you only take one thing from this: the earlier you arrive, the more choice you have but the less time each seller has for you, and the later you arrive, the less choice but the more room to actually talk someone down. Neither is the "right" time. It depends whether you're hunting for something specific or just seeing what turns up.

What I'd say if you only get one Saturday a month for this: split it. Arrive close to opening for the choice, and if you've still got half an hour spare at the end, walk back through before you leave. You'd be surprised what's still sitting there, quietly waiting for someone to notice it on the way out.

I write up the rest of what I find, properly, with the stories behind it, over at lucyharperfinds.co.uk.

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