All my trays tell a story

Richard Percival, 31, collects brewery trays – and now has about 1,000!

The best tray I ever had was the one I gave to a friend! That was back in 1982, when I was on a training course in Oxfordshire for the Courtaulds textile company.

The training centre had a little bar and it was there that I spotted a Hunt Edmonds beer tray. I got talking to the barman. He told me that the Hunt Edmonds brewery in Banbury, had closed down in 1965.

One of my best pals, Andrew Ludlow, collected brewery items, so I did a deal with the barman. I put a few coins into the charity box and he let me take the tray for Andrew.

Six months later, after starting my own collection, I realised what a find it had been. I still kick myself for giving it away!

My family thought that I'd gone mad, of course. I'd never collected anything in my life, except tea cards when I was a kid. But I like the fact that the trays are so different and there is a history behind them.

The breweries started producing them in the 1890s when there was table service in all the pubs. People would yell for the barmaid to bring them drinks. The trays were practical and a good way to advertise.

Most collectors of brewery items go for mats or towels, but I think the trays are far more

'I'm not going to stop until I have them all'

beautiful. The designs and artwork are often complex.

You can tell the tray's age by its shape and what it's made from. The early ones were made of brass, then copper and enamel and, finally, from heavy tin. The first trays were round or oval – there were no square ones until the late 1940s. My favourite comes from the Altons Brewery in Derby. Dated 1922, it's still in superb condition and has a picture on it of an old cellarman dressed in plus fours.

I have one room at home completely devoted to trays – about 200 covering the walls. Another 800 are stored.

My girlfriend Michaela thinks I'm barmy, but every now and then, I catch her creeping into the room to sneak a look at one of my latest finds.

Tracking down the trays is fun. I've worked my way around nearly every junk and antique shop in the country and I turn up at fairs and car boot sales at 6am, so I don't miss out.

If there's a particular tray that I'm desperate for, I'll narrow it down to the area that it comes from and take out an ad in the local newspaper.

The oldest tray I've got dates back to 1892 and comes from Frederick Smith's brewery in Aston, Birmingham.

The maximum I've paid for a tray is £35. I tend to pay around £10 for a tray from the 1960s, and more for the older ones.

But now the prices are beginning to rise quite rapidly and a tray that I bought for £3.50 a few years ago, I could now sell to another collector for around £30-£40.

There are still many trays I would love to have and I'm not going to stop until I have all the ones that I want – even if it takes me a lifetime!