

TRAY collecting for beginners

Richard Percival has been collecting British Brewery advertising trays since 1982 and has become Britain's leading authority on the subject. To try to encourage more people to start, Richard explains just how easy it is to produce a substantial collection of trays in a short time at a low cost.

Maybe I'm biased but of all the forms of breweriana I can't think of a better, good value option than trays. Mirrors, showcards, matchstickers, coasters and jugs are all big time money nowadays, yet you can still pick up a good tray for less than £10.00. So if you do choose the tray option what's the best way forward?

My advice would be to define your limits first. I was lucky as I started over 19 years ago when really for me there were no limits. However I still have a very clear view of what I want and what I don't want. For me my limits of my collection are defined as follows:

1. Only brewery and cider trays (not whisky)
2. Only real ale (i.e. no keg items)
3. Anything 1970 or pre 1970
4. Only British Items
5. Only trays that I like!

In addition, for the first 10 years of collecting I limited myself to a budget of maximum £20 a tray! (and I stuck to this rigidly so as not to raise the market prices). Obviously I have to be a little more flexible these days, but I tell you truthfully I still pick up about 80% of my trays for less than the £20 I used to set myself.

For a new collector therefore you might define your limits in any of the following ways.

- A)** Pick an era like I did - I'd say that still the best value trays today are the 1960's to 1970's, with few ever peaking over the £15 mark.
- B)** Maybe pick a type of tray, for instance stick to a maker e.g. "Wade PDM (1970's)" or "Reginald Corfield" (Mostly 1960's).
- C)** If you wanted to go for the more rare tray you could opt for enamels or copper/brass trays as an example.
- D)** You could do what I do and set yourself a limit on condition. Ask yourself the question - do I really want my items to be in perfect condition or do I just want that item full stop?



For your information I started by collecting trays in any condition - but now go for good to mint condition - obviously that is reasonably subjective, but you get to know what is acceptable and what is not.

- E)** Another option is to pick a city, town, region or simply one brewery. Personally if I were starting again I'd go for a region, which could be as wide or narrow as you want. I'd probably pick an area like "The Midlands", "Yorkshire" or even one country like "Scotland". For example I must have about 100 Scottish trays which form a lovely collection on its own.
- F)** An option which is narrower still, and one I probably wouldn't recommend unless accompanied by other forms of Breweriana, would be to collect from only one brewery - one that springs to mind is Bass or Bass/Worthington or breweries taken over by Bass. There are about 50+ trays I know of which were produced by Bass alone! Another obvious (but expensive) choice is that of Guinness. Guinness produced about 40 cartoon type trays before 1970; but the problem here is you're competing with a large

number of Guinness devotees willing to pay large sums of money for relatively common items.

G) My final suggestion in defining your limits is one that gives you most flexibility. Why not simply give yourself a maximum number of trays that you would be willing to keep say 50 or 100 of your favourites. Once past the 100 mark be ruthless and get rid of your 101st most favourite. In this way you'll build up a good collection in no time at all, and eventually turn it into a collection to be envied.

SO you've defined your limits and are ready to start collecting these beautiful objects. Where do you go from here?

Let's assume you've picked the most flexible option above and you've set yourself a limit of 50 trays. Of course your 1st tray is your best tray so there aren't any limits at this point.

Where to find/how to go about finding trays

- 1.** Why not start at the place where trays were meant for - in the pub. If you enjoy a pint like I do then maybe target some older known establishments. Do not however take without asking first. By-and-large landlords and landladies are more than willing to start you off. I always used to put a small sum in their charity box or offer to buy a pint. Although I have to say trays are much less common there these days! However, there's still some attractive ones about. I've been fortunate enough to pick up a few lovely examples by asking publicans with probably my favourites being a 1950's tray from Darley Thorne's brewery and a 1960's Offilers brewery tray depicting a posing lady (one of a set of 10).
- 2.** So you're on your way - where else? There are of course antique shops, bric-a-brac shops and Junk shops which might yield a good tray, such as the Atkinson's example - leaving a contact number is of course advisable but in all honesty I don't think I've ever had an antique dealer proactively ring me in 19 years of collecting, therefore it is better to keep ringing and checking certain shops regularly knowing that one time or another you'll strike it lucky.
- Uncovering a perfect condition 1950's Felinfoel tray is probably the best find for me in this category, although for the amount of time spent in these shops the payback has

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for me been relatively poor. How many times do you hear "We had a tray in last week but I think we sold it!" or words to that effect.

3. The biggest and fastest payback certainly in these initial steps of collecting is attending certain antique and collectors fair. The normal run of the mill antique fairs doesn't usually yield much in the way of trays, although I have picked up a good Oakwell Ales tray in the past. My recommendation is to target two types of event; firstly, the big fairs like Newark, Donnington, Ardingly or Birmingham, have certainly in initial years yielded something special for me. Through the sheer mass of stalls statistical probability suggests that something will turn up. Over the past few years my best discovery at Newark was a mint condition pre-war William Youngers tray depicting Father William, and a pre 1900 George Mackays brass tray, both on the same day! Many collectors argue that the big events are now a waste of time but the general view is that the twice yearly Donnington specialist antique and advertising fair is probably one not to be missed. The second type of event which generally uncovers trays are the big bottle fairs such as Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and Wath. Although bottles are the main items on sale, if you're a collector of trays you won't be disappointed. Smaller bottle fairs don't tend to produce that many surprises although a lot of time and effort goes into organising these events to keep bottle collecting alive.

4. By far the biggest source of trays for me is through a network of friends and contacts built up over the years. Don't be afraid to approach people, ask advice and generally enthuse about your hobby. Although the fairs represent a good day out, making friends at these events will enhance your collection significantly as a result.

I've picked up trays from both private collectors and people within the trade and enjoy the conversation every time a new tray appears.

Many collectors enjoy negotiating swap deals amongst themselves; however this isn't a part of collecting I particularly enjoy, although a couple of good trays like the Melbourne's of Leeds have been the result.

5. I think by now your collection should be fairly significant: a two year time span should ensure that your 50 trays contain some superb examples but again that depends on how hard you work at it. For me the next step is through use of the media. Starting with an easy way to make your needs known, through advertising. To get a good result though an advert frankly is pot luck, but I would highly recommend constant repeated ad's in certain magazines like "The People's Mag", "BBR", Camra's "Whats Brewing" etc. All these represent good value and you might get one of those "one off" calls out of the blue that yield a tray such as the Morgan's



of Norwich.

I'd been chasing for years. Advertising in newspapers can be costly depending on which you pick, but repeating the ad is the key - I picked up a Robert Youngers of Edinburgh tray only after weeks of the same continuous message.

Newspapers however are usually more than willing to help if you write a letter to the editor or have a story for them. I have written many newspaper and magazine articles including a page in Women's magazine "Best" being the most unusual one! My biggest success from one of these stories was finding a rare enamel Russells of Malton tray. Writing articles though takes much time and effort and is incredibly frustrating if nothing appears for months on end. Appearing on Radio and TV is probably the time you know you've got something really special, but I've surprising had little response from either.

There are other ways and means of obtaining trays such as joining similar societies (Brewery History Society being the best example) or getting closer to auction houses but as a starter if you follow my points 1 - 5 you shouldn't go far wrong.

Other remarks

Once you've got the "taste for the chase" my advice is to follow up on your leads - I added over 20 trays to my collection by simply calling a friend who knew a friend. Amongst them was a fine pre-war Henley's Cider tray. I also couldn't believe my eyes when the landlord of a pub had asked me to "come back when he wasn't so busy" - I did so 6 months later to find over 200 items rusting in his loft! I managed to pick out about 5 or 6 unspoiled copies including a lovely Ramsden's tray depicting one of their shire horses.

You'll also find that you make at least one big mistake when at the time you leave an items and can't believe how stupid you've been - I've done it twice - firstly not picking up a very rare enamel Bass tray offered to me for £10 because I thought it was a common tray; secondly turning down an oval 1900 Dryborough of Edinburgh tray which I thought too plain at the time.

Finally

If you think there are not many trays left, think again! There is a new breed of animal is out there; the pub refurbishers who are buying what they see at daft prices. Don't be put off - on average a new unknown version of a tray appears at least once a month and I'm still picking up about 15 new trays a year.

I would like to know of more people who collect trays, the more collectors the merrier. If anyone use needs advice please call: 01908 672536 or email: rpercival@email.msn.com
CHEERS - and happy collecting.

