

One for the road...

Real ale fanatic Richard Percival is never stuck for a tray when he serves his guests a brew – he owns a record-breaking 1,000 of them! Karen Gooch meets the man...

Richard's collection is the largest in this country, if not the world. It all started by accident 23 years ago when Richard was following his home football team, Notts County, on an away match to Brighton.

"We were in a pub and a friend who collected beer mats asked the landlord for some. He said he couldn't have a mat, but could have a brewery tray. My friend didn't want it, so I took it instead and it all started from there." Supporting his team led Richard all over the country and, at each pub, he would ask for a tray. "I always put £1 in a charity box – I've honestly never pinched one!"

As Richard's collection grew, he became absorbed in the history of tray manufacturing, and is now something of an expert in the field. After ten years, his collection had swelled to include about 500 post-1970 trays, which he decided to sell. He plumped for 1970 as a cut-off

point because this was the date that two of the most venerable manufacturers closed down.

The materials used give vital clues about the age of a tray, explains Richard: "During the 1880s, the trays were made of brass and copper and were commissioned by a brewery to advertise their products. For about 10 – 15 years, from around the

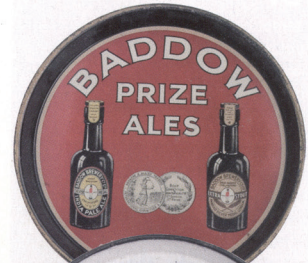
turn of the century, the trays were enamel. But enamel chips easily and was replaced by heavy steel in around 1910 – 1920. This was used right up to the start of WW2.

"After the war, manufacturers used the excess materials found in aircraft, a very light

alloy, and this was used for about ten years." Tin was also used, getting lighter and lighter from the 1950s onwards.

Now, however, most trays are plastic, and Richard has no interest in collecting them. Pre-1970, the manufacturer Hancock, Corfield and Waller of Mitchum in Surrey made trays for countless breweries.

"One of my dreams is to get a bigger barn and convert it into a museum. As well as about 1,000 trays, I also own a lot of old pub adverts and mirrors, many pre-war, which I would love to display."



Pre-war trays from Britain's long-lost breweries including Richard's favourite from the Great Baddow brewery in Essex.



Richard holding two super examples of trays dating back to the 1920s.

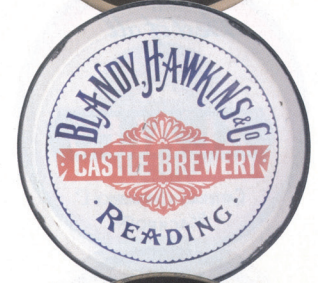
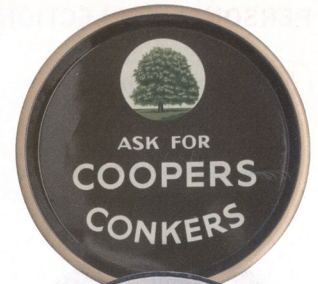
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGUS LAMOND

In the late-1930s, Reginald Corfield broke away from the company and set up his own business in Lombard Street, London. "These two companies made real quality trays, and both went out of business in 1970. That gave me the cut-off date for my collection," says Richard, who recently resigned as a managing director of a sports company.

Sought-after trays are pre-war, black-backed specimens, which are made of heavy steel with the tarred effect back.

Did you know?

- Pre-WW2 trays were mostly made with black backs.
- The earliest trays were made from brass and copper. At the turn of the 20th century, they were made from enamel, then heavy steel, moving through to tin and now plastic.



Extinct pre-war trays from the south of England.

PERSONAL COLLECTION

Further reading

A Century of British Brewers, by Norman Barber of the Brewery History Society. ISBN: 1873966040.



The R.F. Case & Co. tray pictured left is the rarest enamel tray known.



"I am very interested in anything with a black back because it means they are pre-war. Two other manufacturers from this period were Bat and Co. of Smethwick, Birmingham, and Sir Joseph Causton. So if anyone owns any, I would love to hear from them!"

Thrills and spills

Richard's collection is housed in a converted barn at his home in Lancashire's Ribble Valley. Special shelving lines the walls of a guest suite where 150 specimens can be displayed at any one time. The remainder are stored in boxes, filed and photographed.

"One of my dreams is to get a bigger barn and convert it into a museum. As well as about 1,000 trays, I also own a lot of old pub adverts and mirrors, many pre-war, which I would love to display. As I am a real ale fan, I'd also like a bar, complete with handpumps – that's the long-term plan."

Most trays are round, measuring 13 1/2" in diameter. Before WW2, most were round or rectangular, with a few oval shaped trays. Post-war, square trays were

introduced, some brightly coloured. As Richard's knowledge grew, he began searching antiques' fairs and junk shops, then specialist advertising antique fairs. "I've got a lot of friends in the trade now, who keep an eye out for me. In the early days, I was the only collector of trays, but now other people have begun collections."

Richard's most cherished tray was made for a relatively small company, the Baddow Brewery Co. of Great Baddow near Chelmsford, Essex, which closed in 1927.

"It's my favourite because it is a rare brewery, and features two bottles of beer proudly displaying the brewery's labels, advertising the fact that their product had won first prize. It is a beautiful deep red, and in very good condition."

Richard's oldest tray is from the 1880s and is made of copper. It advertises the William Whitelaw & Sons brewery of Fisherrow in Edinburgh and features the company trademark etched on the bottle label, a coat of arms with the motto, 'Honestas'.

"It has got to be pre-1890 because that was when the brewery went out of

business, and it is probably worth between £200 – £300," says Richard proudly.

Most pre-war black-backed trays fetch about £50 each, but of course collectors are always searching for the rare gem in pristine condition – and preferably, to be had for a snip! Although Richard owns the largest known collection, he is still searching for trays from specific breweries which he knows existed, but has yet to track down.

They include trays advertising Sidney Fussell & Sons Ltd of Rode in Somerset – "I know they exist because I have seen them, one in a pub, which the landlord wouldn't let me have, and another in a junk shop which was in a very poor condition!"

Another tray which is proving elusive may have been made for Salt and Co. Ltd of Burton-on-Trent. "I don't know if this company had trays, so if anyone out there knows of one, please let me know."

There is a third tray which eludes his collection – made for Russells Gravesend Brewery Ltd in Kent, it features a shrimp

as a trademark. "I'm told it exists, but I've never seen one," says Richard. It would be black-backed, as he believes it dates to the late-1920s.

And how does Richard track down trays these days? "eBay!" he laughs. "I really was coming to a grinding halt, and then eBay came along and it opened up another world. This year

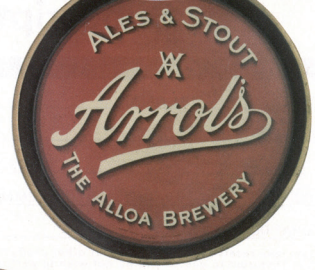
I've added 30 trays to my collection and 28 have been on eBay."

One tray turned up in America – the owner had visited the UK in the 1940s and had taken a tray back home as a memento.

Without eBay, Richard says such specimens would be lost to collectors.

Now 42-years-old, his zeal for collecting is undiminished. So if you see a man clutching a copy of *A Century of British Brewers* it is reasonable to assume it will be Richard, tirelessly tracking down trays. **C**

Readers can contact Richard on 07715 369540 or email rpercival@email.msn.com



Many unique trays shown here include an Arrols tray (above) bought from eBay recently for £53.

A mixture of black-backed pre-war trays, light alloy trays and the oldest tray in Richard's collection (copper, pictured right) from William Whitelaw's Scottish brewery.