

its growths down to a few inches from the ground each winter and selecting only one shoot to grow the following spring. The resultant prize would be enormous heart-shaped leaves – 3 feet / 90 centimetres across, perfect for children to have fun with, or for someone with a small town-garden who aims to turn it into an exotic jungle. But the last thing I wanted to do with my young paulownia was cut it down. I wanted it to grow, to become a spreading tree with large, but not freakishly large, leaves.

And grow it did – I have never known a tree grow so quickly. Today, not quite six years since I stuck it into its corner, it is doing its stuff: it is over four metres tall, blackbirds perch in its usefully spreading branches and it is actually beginning to hide the flats. Most astonishing of all, it produced two spikes of foxglove flowers this May, and is making at least eight sprays of nutty buds in readiness for next year. Yet a trusted old catalogue of mine had warned: 'Flowers seldom seen until the tree is well established, when, after a hot summer they open in May.' The words 'after a hot summer' are key to this caution: summers could not be relied upon for warmth when that catalogue was printed, and springs often brought late frosts – death to the paulownia's flowers.

Perhaps, then, one advantage of climate change may be that we in the warmer parts of the UK can now hope to rival gardens in Italy and along the Mediterranean where the paulownia is the tree that makes a cloud of palest, ashen mauve amongst the dark cypresses in May, each separate fallen flower beneath the tree an exquisite mauve trumpet with a creamy yellow throat.

But if you have never seen one, and can't take my word for it, you might be able to visit London's Chelsea Physic Garden next May where you will find at least three different varieties in full bloom: *Paulownia fortunei*, with particularly smooth grey bark; *P. lilacina*, whose foxglove flowers are arranged in fat bunches faintly reminiscent of lilac; and best of all, the grand *P. tomentosa*, twelve metres high yet only planted at Chelsea in 1964.

Paulownia flowers arrive before the leaves; they unfold from bare, grey branches and seem visionary, unreal, against a blue sky. If you'd like to plant a large, flowering tree this autumn, if you want it to grow fast, and if you live in a relatively warm county, this might be your answer.



ANORAK

RICHARD PERCIVAL

FOR ABOUT 25 years I've been the ridicule of my friends, my family – and of pub landlords. Why? Because I'm Britain's biggest collector of brewery advertising trays, or waiter trays, if you want to call them by their proper name. Yes, I'm talking about the tin trays on which you'd carry your drinks outside on a hot summer's day. Well, not quite, as my collection spans from the 1880s to 1970, and to have a tray still in use from the Sixties is pretty remarkable in this day and age.

When my strange hobby began those who knew me best thought I was raving mad – especially when I gave my well-rehearsed speech to gain the attention of an unsuspecting landlord. Friends would cringe when I opened the conversation



Richard Percival, tray man

with, 'Hello, I've got an unusual hobby!' I could see the look of horrible anticipation in the poor bar-person's face: it was almost a relief when I said I only collected beer trays. £1 in the charity box would usually do and I'd obtain a new example for my fast-growing collection. After the initial shock in the pub, my hobby became the centre-piece of conversation. Regulars in the pub would become involved, recollecting that they once had a tray advertising this old brewery, or that beer.

By and large, most publicans reacted positively to my passion. However, the same cannot be said of the publican of a

now-closed pub in Lancaster – one of the toughest pubs in Britain. I'd spotted a tray on the wall as I was walking past and plucked up the courage to buy a beer. I walked in with a few photos and asked for the landlord. The pub went silent. I recited my speech, as was my habit, but didn't quite get the response I expected. 'What do you want? A Blue Peter badge?' was the unfortunate answer. I was laughed out of the establishment and, needless to say, I never returned.

With the size of my collection expanding and the number of rarer trays becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, I began to turn my attention to the media. Perhaps they could help?

I'd written to the *Bury Times* chasing a tray from Chadwick's brewery which closed before the war. I was delighted when a gentleman phoned to say that his grandfather was Mr Chadwick, and that he had such a tray in his garage. Unfortunately, he didn't ring back, so I asked for help from the newspaper to track him down. I received a call from an historian who had been researching the Chadwick brewery for many years, but who didn't know of a grandchild in the family tree – it was exciting news for him too.

Lancashire radio had me on live with the story, and then a call came from Granada TV. In a couple of days' time, and a full three weeks of chasing this tray story, I was about to go on TV. I couldn't have guessed what was about to hit me. My girlfriend at the time took me out for a meal. She looked sheepishly at me and said: 'Don't be angry. Mr Chadwick is actually a colleague from my work. It's all been a prank.' I had been completely sucked in and couldn't believe it, though I did manage to see the funny side.

So, you thought tray collecting was dull. Today I have Britain's biggest collection, with well over 1,000 trays. My collection has appeared in many magazines, been discussed on radio numerous times, and been viewed on TV twice, including on Channel 4's *Collector's Lot*. I'm still as passionate about the topic and I believe that I'm preserving brewery history. People are genuinely stunned when they first see my trays displayed and mickey-taking has turned to admiration.

I'm still searching for pre-war trays which can be identified by the fact that they are black coloured when you turn them over. If anyone can help a sad anorak and has a black-backed tray, I'd greatly appreciate a call on 07715 369540 – but please don't say you're a Chadwick because I won't believe you.