

SATURDAY SUNDAY

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The Beer Hunter

SATURDAY PEOPLE

Richard Percival has built up a valuable collection of beer trays and other pub memorabilia. He spoke to JENNY SCOTT about his unusual hobby

TWENTY-three years ago a group of young football supporters crowded into a Brighton pub to sup a few post-match pints.

One of the group was an avid collector of beer mats and asked the landlord if he had a few to spare. Instead the landlord offered them a beer tray — and that was how Gisburn man Richard Percival's amazing collection of breweriana began.

Now Richard, 41, originally from Nottingham, has Britain's best collection of beer trays — originally known as waiter trays — as well as several old pub mirrors, match-strikers, menu holders and snuff boxes, all stored in his home... appropriately a converted pub outbuilding.

"When I first started collecting beer trays, no-one else had thought about it," he said.

"I've been collecting for 23 years and it took another 10 years before the next tray collector came along.

"I had this hobby 10 years before anyone else even thought about it. That gave me a massive head-start and makes my collection very valuable."

Now Richard has over 1,000 trays, all of which pre-date 1970.

He said: "When I first started I was interested in any old trays, but now it's the history that attracts me.

"I sold about 500 of my newer trays eight years ago. I now see myself as preserving brewery history. I've got some trays made of copper — the oldest dates back to 1880."

Richard's trays, which are emblazoned with quaint depictions of Guinness toucans, ale-drinking Kent farmers and floppy-eared St Bernards advertising Top Dog beer, stand on shelves which line the walls of his home.

"Any tray that pre-dates World War Two has a black back because they were made from steel," he explained.

"After the war they started to make them from the aluminium that was left over from aircraft manufacturing."

Richard first began to acquire his collection thanks to his travels up and down the country as a Notts County football fan.

A real ale fan and advocate of traditional pubs and brewers, Richard's collection is signally wide-ranging.

"A lot of people tend to collect only from their own regions or cities, whereas my collection spans the whole country," he said.

"My beer trays all come from British brewery traders from Cornwall up to the north of Scotland." In the past a landlord would give him a tray and



RELIQS: Richard Percival with part of his beer tray collection



Richard would donate some money to the charity box on the bar.

"The next phase," he said, "came when I started to look around antique shops and special brewery advertising fairs.

"I started to meet fellow collectors and I built up a network of people who would look out for trays for me.

"Now my biggest source of trays is eBay, the internet auction site.

"There's a special section of it devoted to breweriana. There are lots of glass, mat and jug collectors, but I'm still only one of a few who collect trays."

So what is it that keeps Richard collecting, 23 years after he picked up his first tray?

He admits part of the fascination is the thrill of the chase.

"I've been collecting trays for so many years, but things still appear that I never knew existed, like a Baddow Prize Ales tray which come up for auction on eBay last year. It was unbelievable."

There's also the nostalgic appeal. "In my collection, 95 per cent of the trays are from breweries that have closed," said Richard. "The only breweries still going are Guinness, John Smith's, Newcastle Breweries and Bass.

"Of those, the Guinness trays are probably the most collectable."

Richard has appeared on the Channel Four show Collector's Lot, had his collection exhibited at Blackburn Museum, and has written articles on his

collection for brewery magazines. But is it a hobby that's in danger of taking over his life?

"I don't let it take over," said Richard, who has worked in some high profile positions as managing director of JD Sports' fashion line and a director of Reebok Europe. "I use my spare time to enhance the collection, but I don't let it run my life."

That's not to say Richard isn't ambitious for his collection. He has now quit his high-flying jobs to start his own business and he's also looking to go into the pub trade himself.

"One of my ambitions in about five years time is to open a pub chain — possibly in this area," he said.

"I'll call the pubs things like The Brewery Tray and The Brewery Mirror. They'll be very traditional pubs and I'll use bits and pieces from my collection to decorate them. They'd be almost like museums themselves, but in a pub."

He's also constantly on the look-out for new trays for his collection and is appealing particularly for any black-backed trays from the Blackburn area.

"I'm particularly desperate to get hold of trays from Blackburn Brewery Company, which was once on Larkhill Street, the Lion Brewery on Coniston Road and Henry Shaw and Co at Salford."

To contact Richard, call (01200) 445052, (07715) 369540 or e-mail rpercival@email.msn.com

