

THE JOYS AND FRUSTRATIONS OF COLLECTING BREWERY TRAYS

by
Richard Percival

It all started about 14 years ago when I used to travel the length and breadth of Britain watching my favourite football team - Notts County.

Having been offered a tray from a landlord during one of these trips I suddenly got the urge from then on.

The following are a few facts about my collection:-

- *I only collect British Brewery Trays (not Whisky or Tobacco)*
- *My trays are all pre-date 1970*
- *My oldest tray dates back to the 1890's*
- *I have over 1,000 trays*
- *About 300 trays date from before the Second World War*
- *I have trays representing over 320 breweries*
- *The entire collection weighs well over 1 tonne*

With over 1,000 trays I bet you're asking - how does he keep and display them? Well the answer to that is that firstly my top 200 are displayed in one room in my house; I consider it to be my "mini museum". Every month I change about 20 or 30 of these trays to vary the interest. Sometimes I display a common theme like, made of copper or brass, a particular makers mark, or the same shape, but quite simply the majority of time I'll just pick my favourites!

While 200 are constantly on display the rest are carefully stored in large blanket boxes (about 4 in all), although you'll usually find a tray or two in most rooms of my small house.

100 of the collection were recently put on display for a 6 month period in the Lancaster Museum.

As for cataloguing I have two main methods - firstly all trays are listed on computer, in addition to those trays I know exist/existed but I've still to obtain a copy for my collection. Secondly a method I would suggest to anyone with a breweriana collection - quite simply I photograph all my trays. Not only is it sensible for insurance purposes but it's great to be able to carry your entire collection around with you.

For information sake I catalogue my trays by county - i.e. I follow Norman Barber's book "A Century of British Brewers" which not only represents a great read but is quite simply my bible when it comes to collecting trays.

When it comes to shapes and sizes manufacturers of trays over the years have been a relatively conservative bunch. The commonest shape is round and measures approx. 13" diameter, a variation on a theme being the smaller 9" round tray. The next most common shape is the 13" square tray, followed closely by rectangular and oval examples.

The most common sized square and round trays were designed to carry 9 pints and 8 pints respectively.

As far as dating is concerned the following description is a rough guide to how I would date a new addition to my collection.

i) The Material Content

<i>Copper and Brass</i>	<i>were usually produced between 1890 - 1920 (if you have a tray with a beaded edge you can be sure it predates 1900)</i>
<i>Enamel</i>	<i>1900- 1920</i>
<i>Heavy Steel</i>	<i>1920- 1940</i>
<i>Light Alloy</i>	<i>1945- 1950s</i>
<i>Tin</i>	<i>1950 to date (although trays in the 1950s and 1960s are much heavier than post 1970)</i>
<i>Aluminium</i>	<i>usually 1950s</i>
<i>Wood</i>	<i>usually 1950s</i>
<i>Bakerlite</i>	<i>usually 1950s</i>

ii) The Makers Mark

Earliest examples of brass trays were produced by 'Art Metal Advertising' although those are few and far between. The commonest makers mark on enamel trays were either 'Hancock Mitcham' or 'Prince of Wares' for heavy steel trays main makers were 'Sir Joseph Causton', 'Bat Co. Ltd' and 'Regional Corfield Ltd'.

The most common makers mark in the 1950s and 1960s were again 'Reginald Corfield' and also "Hancock, Corfield and Waller" and "Metal Box". Finally most aluminium trays were produced by 'Mermaid', 'Reginald Corfield' or 'Samuel Groves'.

iii) Brewery Closure Dates

The easiest method of dating extinct brewery trays is quite simply to follow 'the bible' and use Norman's book. Many trays have tell tale signs of the specific era in which they were produced such as the word 'Limited' or 'And Co.' or changes in name after merger. Sometimes trays are dated with their awards or in the case of some 1950s and 1960s examples their exact date is stamped after the makers mark.

All in all I'd say taking into account a combination of all factors can usually date the tray within a few years.

When you've got over 1,000 trays it's obvious that to add to this size of collection becomes more and more difficult. Nevertheless there's still a big market out there. I know of at least 300 pre 1970 trays which I still need to acquire. One of the joys of tray collecting is that there's no known list of what actually has been produced. I would conservatively say that based on my experienced there's another 1,000+ trays out there waiting to be discovered!

My main methods of acquiring new trays now come from 4 areas. Firstly I write many articles for local newspapers round the country, usually targeting areas which might help me 'add' to my collection. Secondly I advertise relatively frequently across specialist magazines and again in newspapers. Thirdly I'm extremely grateful to an army of fellow collectors who are on the constant look out for the more unusual item.

Finally you have to be prepared to turn up at antique fairs and boot fairs at ridiculously early times. Getting up at 4:30am to travel to Dunstable being the latest example.

For young budding collectors you don't have to be quite so daft. Asking a landlord and donating a £1 to charity usually does the trick.

The greatest pleasure for me as a collector of brewery trays is that I feel I'm preserving Brewery History, all be it a very small part. What better way to show the changing face of history than through advertising? For example, the way trademarks have been passed on through brewery takeovers as shown by Hoares' toby jug passing to Charringtons. Or the way the names of famous ales and stouts have been passed on and in some cases are still being used, Joules bitter being a fine example.

The use of the brewery tray has also changes over the years. Before the war, trays were used by waiters to bring your ale to the table hence their real name 'Waiter Trays'.

Throughout the 50's, 60's and 70's trays were a common site in most country pubs where beer could be taken to their gardens on a balmy summer evening. Sadly have you noticed that fewer and fewer pubs seem to have a tray on request? As costs increase and profits (not service) are the driving force, trays seem to be fast disappearing.

As a final plea I would like to ask any of your readers if they could help me locate one or some of the easier trays I know exist from breweries which in history terms are relatively modern.

Examples are as follows:

- *Bristol United Breweries (closed 1956)*
- *Wells and Winch Bedford Brewery (closed 1961)*
- *Brampton Brewery Co. Ltd of Chesterfield (closed 1955)*
- *Hartleys West Cowick Brewery Ltd (closed 1957)*
- *Yates Castle Brewery - Ardwick (closed 1961)*
- *Alnwick Brewery Co. Ltd (closed 1963)*
- *Dares Birmingham Brewery (closed 1961)*
- *Walsall & District Clubs Brewery (closed 1960)*

There are many others but if anyone can help a fanatic, I'd greatly appreciate a call on (01524) 68979.
