

Collecting Things

John Hill

John Hill shares his home with about 200 sewing machines. His passion began when he was searching for bits of second-hand furniture and kept seeing 'beautiful old sewing machines that were next to nothing to buy'. He couldn't resist them. Then a friend had a machine that wouldn't work, so she asked John to look at it for her. At that stage, he was not an authority on the subject, but he worked on it for three days and eventually got it going. Later he opened up a small stand in a London market. 'Most people seemed uninterested. Then a dealer came and bought everything I'd taken along. I thought, "Great! This is my future life." But after that, I never sold another one there and ended up with a stall in another market which was only moderately successful.' Nowadays, he concentrates on domestic machines in their original box containers with their handbooks. He is often asked if he does any sewing with them. The answer is that, apart from making sure that they work, he rarely touches them.

Will Smith

As a boy, Will Smith collected hundreds of vintage cameras, mostly from jumble sales and dustbins. Later, when the time came to buy his first house, he had to sell his valuable collection in order to put down a deposit. A few years after, he took up the interest again and now has over a thousand cameras, the earliest dating from 1860. Now Will 'just cannot stop collecting' and hopes to open his own photographic museum where members of the public will be able to touch and fiddle around with the cameras. Whilst acknowledging that the Royal Camera Collection in Bath is probably more extensive than his own, he points out that 'so few of the items are on show there at the same time that I think my own personal collection will easily rival it.'

Kate Williams

Kate Williams is one of the foremost authorities on plastics in Britain. She has, in every corner of her house, a striking collection of plastic objects of every kind, dating from the middle of the last century and illustrating the complex uses of plastic over the years. Kate's interest started when she was commissioned to write her first book. In order to do this, she had to start from scratch; so she attended a course on work machinery, maintaining that if she didn't understand plastics manufacture then nobody else would. As she gathered the information for her book, she also began to collect pieces of plastic from every imaginable source: junk shops, arcades, and the cupboards of friends. She also collects 'because it is vital to keep examples. We live in an age of throw-away items: phones, computers, hairdryers – they are all replaced so quickly.' Kate's second book, *Classic Plastics: from Bakelite to High Tech*, is the first published guide to plastics collecting. It describes collections that can be visited and gives simple and safe home tests for identification. She admits that 'plastic is a mysterious substance and many people are frightened of it. Even so, the band of collectors is constantly expanding.'

Jane Bruce

Jane Bruce already had twenty years of collecting one thing or another behind her when she started collecting 'art deco' fans in the 1990s. It happened when she went to an auction sale and saw a shoebox filled with them. Someone else got them by offering a higher price and she was very cross. Later, to her astonishment, he went round to her flat and presented them to her. 'That was how it all started.' There were about five fans in the shoe-box and since then they've been exhibited in the first really big exhibition of 'art deco' in America. The fans are not normally on show, however, but are kept behind glass. They are extremely fragile and people are tempted to handle them. The idea is to have, one day, a black-lacquered room where they can be more easily seen. Jane doesn't restrict herself to fans of a particular period, but she will only buy a fan if it is in excellent condition. The same rule applies to everything in her house.

Questions

1. Who had to re-start their collection?
2. Who was misled by an early success?
3. Who received an unexpected gift?
4. Who admits to making little practical use of their collection?
5. Who regrets the rapid disappearance of certain items?
6. Who is aware that a fuller collection of items exists elsewhere?
7. Who has a history of collecting different items?
8. Who performed a favour for someone they knew?
9. Who is a national expert on their subject?
10. Who is aware that they form part of a growing group?