



## Buried treasures

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**Buying and selling motoring collectables has reached fever pitch. There's never been a better time to see what's squirrelled away in the garage. Jill Wedge investigates. Photography by David Shepherd**

It seems that everyone potentially has something of value in the back of a cupboard or in the garden shed these days. In the UK there's a whole host of television programmes dedicated to collecting, rummaging around car boots sales, discovering lost treasures in the attic or unlocking vast fortunes by auctioning off the family heirlooms.

Strictly speaking antiques have to be more than 100 years old, so items relating to the motor trade mostly fall under the banner of 'collectables'. In the US, the term 'petroliana' is used to describe collections of bits and pieces associated with the motor industry – in the UK it's mostly known as 'automobilia'.

In the last 30 years, fascination with the desirability of automobilia has grown and a whole industry has sprung up around it. Now, there are world-wide collectors' fairs for car paraphernalia or 'autojumbles', and regular auctions. Where once trinkets and disused equipment produced by or for the motor industry could be picked up for a pound or two, the same items now fetch astonishing prices and can be afforded by only the most serious collector.

The first car memorabilia auction was held in the UK in 1965, at the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, Hampshire. As each item becomes more sought after, the prices are pushed up and their availability lessens, so explains Toby Wilson, head of automobilia at British auction house Bonhams.

"In the 1960s, most people considered this stuff to be junk and it was thrown away. As soon as auction houses recognised there was a market, the competition for goods started to rise. More property came on to the market, people dug around their garages at home for items, prices rose and demand outgrew supply."

Wilson cites musicians, actors, sportsmen and TV personalities among the celebrity collectors he has on his books. Bonhams has had an automobilia department since 1989 and holds about 15 automobilia auctions a year: four in the US, two in Europe and another nine in the UK at events such as the Festival of Speed at Goodwood.

Another UK auction house, Christie's, also has an automobilia department and, as the market started to boom, specialised, regional auction houses started springing up such as H&H in Chester, Cheffins in Cambridge and Lambert & Foster in Kent.

Of BP-related products, the most valuable is an enamel sign known as 'The Winner', depicting a Bentley at speed passing under a banner showing BP and a union jack. It was produced for petrol stations and displayed on high streets as an advertisement. It's exceptionally rare and can reach in excess of £10,000.

BP went through a phase in the 1920s of producing very patriotic products, such as this sign and including the BP 'roundel' surrounded by the union jack in four different sizes, all of which are highly prized. A double-sided sign designed to be wall-mounted and in good order could fetch between £180 and £240.



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“I once was called out to a location in Wales,” says Wilson, “Where a shed had been completely re-roofed many years before with BP union jack enamel signs – what had seemed a sensible and handy solution I’m sure at the time! Luckily, they’d been put on enamel-side in, so were in good condition. I doubt if they stayed on long as the owner seemed very interested when I told him he could probably get at least £100 each for them.”

Scrap dealers are a good source of old collectables. “Some tell me they now regret throwing away printed tin signs found rotting at derelict garages as they can still reach £60 to £80,” says Wilson.

Lapel badges – often issued by oil companies to garage attendants – make a popular collectors item. BP union jack examples reach £80. A fairly rare example was a pair of miniature ShellMex/BP lapel badges produced during a very short period of time during the two companies’ merger/joint venture. They were inset with tiny diamonds and given to employees for long service. Still in their original boxes, and with the presentation certificates, the pair fetched £130 at an auction managed by Wilson in Harrogate.

The most popular piece of automobilia is undoubtedly the petrol pump globe. Collectors with room to set up their own museums or displays delight in these attractive relics from a bygone era.

“They can be usually easily restored to their former glory with wipe over and a regular light bulb installed,” says Wilson. BP issued several globe shapes – the shield shape in yellow and green with a black lining being the most sought-after and reaching up to £250. Meanwhile the Carless Capel & Leonard company globe in the shape of a sack of coal is the rarest and one example recently commanded £14,500.

Of course, before the advent of petrol pumps, petrol or gasoline was sold in cans usually bearing advertisements and highly sought-after. A two-gallon steel Valor can with a brass cap and impressed with the BP brand in good order could make £20. Or not-so-good examples at just £2 or £3 make excellent starting points for a new collection. But the most valuable piece of automobilia sold in recent years – and a prize beginners could only dream of – has to be a Renee Lalique clear glass fox bonnet mascot, made in 1930. It fetched \$160,000.

- Contact Bonhams for free pre-sale estimates on [automobilia@bonhams.com](mailto:automobilia@bonhams.com)

## A drive down memory lane

Mike Smith is one of the UK’s most prolific collectors. And he’s turned his dream into a reality by recreating a 1930’s garage at his home in Buckinghamshire.

His passion began in the 1960s when he was a leading Mini Cooper ‘S’ rally car driver. He went on to attend, and then to run, autojumbles and collectors’ fairs across the country under the name Mike Smith’s Motoring Past. He shares his hobby-turned business with his wife of 13-years, Felicity, who has her own collection of car-related penknives.

He has no idea of the total value of his collection – it’s more a labour of love creating the perfect environment for his 1983 S-type Jaguar and 1933 Invicta. But the pleasure it gives him and the countless visitors drawn by his exhibits each year is priceless. Smith’s Chiltern Museum of Motoring must contain every example of automobilia known to modern collectors:



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hundreds of promotional items for garages from model tankers, lubricants cans and lapel badges; car badges; driving licences; road and garage signs; globes; 1930's petrol pumps; postcards and even pre-war glass oil bottles filled with motor oil. It encompasses items produced for the Automobile Association (AA), taxis and Hackney carriages, and London buses.

Each item has a tale to tell: the 1920s blue BP sign, found buried beneath the earth at a scrap merchant's; the rare AA ice-bound road sign he paid £325 for. But Smith is still searching for a 1920s Stepney Tyre Company enamel sign displaying a round tyre and a bull dog, and a Brookland's 1916 member and guest entry badge. Both have so far eluded him.

- Jill Wedge specialises in writing for and editing employee and customer publications for major corporates.