



This month sees the massive auction of antiques from R.E. Summerfield's premises in Cheltenham. In this exclusive article Simon Reynolds recalls the life of the man whose shop was a landmark.

Pictures: MARTIN REYNOLDS

INSIDE ALADDIN'S CAVE OF ANTIQUES



With the death earlier this year of R.E. Summerfield, Cheltenham has lost one of its best-known, if not always best-loved characters. His shop, a local landmark, had a façade sufficiently famous to feature on a postcard sold by the local Museum and Art Gallery.

Ronald Ernest Summerfield was born in Derby during the First World War, the son of industrious parents who had built up a decorating business in the city. According to his lifelong friend Mrs Bessie Yendley, the family home at Littleover just outside Derby was hardly conventional, a former munitions works, skilfully converted by the family into a spacious house containing, amongst other curiosities, a Victorian barrel organ of which the young Ronald was inordinately fond and a very large and ferocious looking stuffed bear that stood inside the front porch, frightening the wits out of the unsuspecting visitor.

Whilst still a boy, Ronald's 'Magpie' instincts became apparent. A curtain was stretched across his bedroom providing a small area for sleeping and the remainder for his rapidly-expanding collection of old books, books on any subject, perhaps with a bias towards the arts. Quantity was the

most important consideration, as I found to my cost when after 60 years of hoarding I was given the task of sorting and disposing of them.

But, back in the 1930s when, having completed his education at Bemrose School where he won a scholarship, it was time to think about earning a living. Employment during those depressed years was almost impossible to find, so, with the consent of his parents (and possibly a sigh of relief at the thought of his collection being 'thinned out') he started to display old books and antiques in a side window of the family shop. The combination

of a good eye and shrewd business sense saw a successful start to a career in antique dealing which would last for 50 years.

The other great love of his life at this time was motorcycling, whether exploring the countryside, track racing or his favourite; competition trials riding. Most weekends saw him in the saddle. Mrs Yendley, who with her husband, competed in motorcycle trials at the time, recalls on more than one occasion that Ronald's winnings had to be used to pay the rent on his newly-acquired shop after a bad week. An active member of the 'Derby Path-





finders' Motorcycle Club he rode a variety of machines including Artel, Triumph, Matchless and Norton.

Mrs Yendley remembers going out on the pillion with him in the 50s to follow the Boxing Day hunt from the Queen's Hotel in Cheltenham, through the town and over Cleeve Hill, a rough but apparently enjoyable ride (no rear suspension in those days!).

After lying untouched in a shed for more than 30 years the Norton's spark plug was cleaned, the oil changed and with one kick it burst into life!

Mr Summerfield's motorcycling expertise was put to good use during

the Second World War when as an army instructor, he trained countless dispatch riders. After the war he resumed antique dealing at his shop 'Ronnie's' in Derby until 1952 when he visited Cheltenham and was so captivated by its beauty, that he was able to persuade his family to move to the town. A large house was purchased in Bayshill Road and a former game dealers shop in Queen's Circus.

The following 10 or 15 years were a 'Golden Age' for buying antiques. All over the country great houses were being sold up and old family collections dispersed. Ronald seldom missed

a sale and was able to purchase many fine items at what would now seem ridiculously low prices.

After his death many of his original sale catalogues, some going back as far as the 1930s were found along with the prices achieved noted carefully in the margins, together with lots of skilful and often amusing sketches of the goods being sold and some of his fellow dealers dozing between lots. These made very interesting reading. One catalogue in particular I remember seeing was for a sale of paintings held by Phillips of London in 1950. One of several lots purchased by Mr Summerfield was a large 17th century oil painting of the Adoration in an ornately-carved frame with three others, 15gns!

Not an unusual price at the time when many antique dealers had racks of 'Old Master Type' pictures in stock with nobody wanting them. Not being able to sell never really bothered Mr Summerfield as he hated parting with anything he liked and his pleasure was in the hunting out and purchase of something interesting.

Over a period of 30 years he managed to fill both the house and shop with an unimaginable quantity of pictures, books, porcelains and almost



RONALD ERNEST SUMMERFIELD.
BORN DERBY 1916
DIED CHELTENHAM 1989

anything else one can think of that took his fancy. Quite how he financed this hoarding was, and probably still is, a mystery to most people.

A couple of years ago I plucked up courage and asked him. He gave me a very knowing smile, shrugged his shoulders and said: "A lot of people laugh at me for buying and selling junk and reproduction stuff, but there's good money in it". That was as much as he would tell me, but I know that the money generated in this way was very cleverly invested in sometimes unfashionable but always good quality things.

Fashions change but quality is always appreciated and over the years many of his purchases became very valuable. On the rare occasion that something was sold it would only be to finance further acquisitions. In this

way he built up vast collections at comparatively small cost.

Though the financial cost was small his way of life took an increasing toll on his health. From childhood he had suffered poor blood circulation and years of motorcycling in all weathers coupled with living in a huge unheated house eventually made him ill and in 1989 he suffered a stroke. His health, both mental and physical, was further impaired by a series of clumsy robberies at his shop and house in Bayshill Road. I remember squeezing into the packed house with him to view the destruction after the last major break-in.

Thieves had smashed down a door and actually cut through an oil painting to get at some comparatively minor pieces of silverware housed in a cabinet at the back of the room.

Almost in tears he showed me some fine pieces of 18th century English and Chinese porcelain that had been crunched underfoot. To harm his collection was to harm the man himself, and I think that at this point he lost the will to carry on. Telling a number of his friends that he had not long to live, he set about getting his estate in order. With characteristic bluntness he gave generous presents to his friends and made bequests to both the Cheltenham and Derby Museums.

The full extent of his generosity will not be known until his vast hoard is sold, to the benefit of various charities at one of the largest auctions Cheltenham has ever seen. Sadly the one man who would have enjoyed it more than anyone else will not be there.