

A Poison Collector in Paradise

By Bob Barbour

It was the 1982 Keene show that started this seemingly endless passion of collecting poison bottles. I was walking past the table of the well-known poison collector, Jerry Jaffe, and something caught my eye. I stopped to peruse these colorful, oddly shaped bottles. I picked up a DP coffin and thought to myself, what an absolutely stunning bottle. I found the price tag and immediately put the bottle back onto the table, astonished that someone wanted \$300 for this tiny bottle. I looked at some of the more reasonably priced poisons and began to set a few aside for purchase.

I selected about five or six poison bottles and began to negotiate the selling price. We settled on a price, when Jerry said, "If you are serious about collecting poison, you might want to consider these two bottles." The two bottles were the DP coffin and the F.A. Thompson coffin and they were priced at about a fourth of what I initially was going to spend. I picked up the Thompson and it, too, was priced at \$300. I had never spent that much for one bottle, much less that times two. Jerry went on to explain the importance of rarity.

"Buy one rare bottle, rather than five common ones. The common poisons will always be available, the rare poisons you won't find at every show" -- wise words from a wise man. But how could I justify the cost, let alone afford the asking price? I stood for a long time while pondering my decision and then bit the proverbial bullet and wrote the check. With the purchase, Jerry included the book "The Benign Blue Coffin and Other Life Saving Bottles," by Roy Morgan and a new "poison collector" was born.

After the show, in my motel room, I lined the bottles up on the table, as many of us do, and reflected on the day's purchases. I loved the poisons, but, it would be some time before I knew I had made the right decision. I can't remember what other bottles I bought at that Keene show, but, I will always cherish the DP and the Thompson I bought from Jerry Jaffe. A few years later we butted

heads on a couple of poison flasks at Skinner's Auction. I was examining a pontiled apricot hobnail flask, when Jerry came over and said, "I will own that flask." And sure enough he did win it! It would be several years before I was able to find a similar flask in a Glass Works Auction. Over the year I've lost touch with Jerry, but, I will always credit or blame him, as the case may be, for my passion in collecting poisons.



- Bottle 1:** Rare Amber KR-4, Carbolic Acid Poison, also found in cobalt blue
Bottle 2: Scarce green Taylor's patent, 1905, 1 example known in cobalt blue
Bottle 3: Scarce KU-24, cobalt blue Foulton's Crescent poison, patent 1905, also found in green, aqua, teal & rosewood
Bottle 4: Scarce KU-16, cobalt blue Star poison, patent 1925, also found in green, rarely in Amber
Bottle 5: Very Scarce, KE-7, Leath & Ross Green Neuraline poison
Bottle 6: Somewhat Scarce KI-10, cobalt blue Wide Mouthed Lewis & Towers poison
Bottle 7: Rare KO-21 variant, deep teal, Yapoo poison, also found in amber, green, cobalt blue & aqua

Only after reading Morgan's book, "The Benign Blue Coffin" several times, did I realize how diverse and fascinating poison bottles were. I was particularly captivated by the patent drawings and their associated namesakes, Wilson, Stephenson, Lewis & Towers, Martin, O'Reilly, Merrikin, O'Quine & Reeve. The accompany photographs of some of these bottles inspired me to seek them out. As I gathered information, it became painfully clear that some of these poisons were incredibly rare and expensive. But they were attainable, albeit in limited quantities due to my finite resources. Over the next few years, I was able

to purchase several of the moderately priced English poisons. I contacted various English bottle dealers and added more poisons to my collection. Back in those days, there was only one auction house in Britain auctioning bottles and I was fortunate to acquire some of my rarer poisons via these auctions.

After several years of collecting, there were several poisons still on my list and these were the crème de la crème of English poisons. The Coffin, the Gilbertson's Wedge, the Wasp Waist, the Binoculars and the Slug were just a few of the rarer jewels that had eluded me.

As the more uncommon English poisons became harder to find, I began to focus on the more easily attainable American poisons. I had relegated myself to the fact that the rarest of the rare English poisons were beyond my reach and means. With the purchases dwindling, my interest naturally began to wane and I started to focus more on the American poisons.

Fast forward 10 years and the American poison collection had grown dramatically, while the English poison collection had stagnated. As space for my collection became an issue, I began to sell off the more common American and English poisons. Slowly the collection

was reduced to a more manageable size, based on quality rather than quantity. Once again, I was able to display all of my poisons in my small office.

I was still attending a few bottle shows a year, but I was noticing that the shows were smaller and the number of better bottles becoming less and less. The talk around the bottle shows seemed to indicate that eBay was mostly responsible for this decline. For years people had blamed the bottle auction houses for the reduction in quality bottles at the shows. Now there was a new threat to the shows, eBay. I heard from fellow collectors of the fantastic bargains they had found on eBay and so I decided to explore this new phenomenon and see what it had to offer. To my surprise, I could now buy poison bottles within the comfort of my office with hundreds of poisons to see and bid on. Everyday there were new listings. It was like going to a different bottle show every week. After a few months on eBay I had purchased some better poisons, but, the bargains were few and far between.

Then someone told me about eBay.uk and an entirely different selection of poisons came to light again. I had essentially ignored the English poisons for many years and my reintroduction was the impetus that I needed to reenergize my enthusiasm for English poisons. I began to look at the English poisons from an entirely different point of view. These bottles had an incredible variety of shapes, colors, embossing and sizes. I soon recognized that the poisons listed in Roy Morgan's book were just a fraction of what were actually manufactured. The English poisons were available and more importantly, unlike some American poisons, they were still reasonably priced. The English side of my poison collection blossomed, while the American side began to dwindle as I sold off the poisons that no longer appealed to me. I think this happens to most bottle collectors. We get pulled in different directions and our collections ebb and flow with the current pulse of our focus.

It was October and I was thumbing through an issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector* when I noticed an advertisement for Jim Hagenbuch's England in January trip. I had always wanted to visit England. Britannia, enveloped in history, home to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Shakespeare, Stonehenge, stately home and castles, the EPL (English Premier League) – professional soccer for you Yanks, Harry Potter, and, of course, London, one of the most exciting

poisons? More importantly, could I afford them? Only time would tell and the day finally arrived for our departure to England.

I will spare you the details of the trip. We didn't buy, let alone see any of the more elusive English poisons, but, we did manage to fill a large suitcase with bottles and goodies for the family back in the states. England more than lived up to our elevated expectations. It was one of the most enjoyable trips of my life. England is blessed with a wonderful history, fantastic people, beautiful scenery and the food...well, it's getting better.

The one part of our trip I will share with you occurred at the Bletchley show, the Winter National. It is one of the largest bottle shows in England with over 200 tables. Jonathan Melnick came up to me and asked if I had seen "The Coffin" poison that someone had brought into the show. I replied, "No, I haven't seen one in the flesh and would love to have a look." A doctor had brought the Coffin to the show; it had recently been purchased at auction. Although the bottle did have some damage, it was still an absolutely stunning example. There was another gentleman there enjoying The Coffin and we were introduced. To my surprise, this gentleman was one of England's Poison Giants. I had

heard many stories about his fabulous poison collection and now I had finally met Brian Thatcher. We started up a conversation that naturally focused on poisons. Brian mentioned that he had been writing poison articles for the ABC magazine. Craving any information on English poisons, I asked if the magazines were still available. Brian generously offered to find the magazines at the ABC table and a few minutes later he came back with four issues. They contained a plethora of information that kept me occupied all the way back to Kansas City.

During the next few months I actively sought out English poisons. The more I learned about English poisons, the more



Bottle 1: Scarce KT-3, green Wilsons, patent 1899

Bottle 2: Very Scarce, KO-81 cobalt blue Cyona, with embossed elephant

Bottle 3: Extremely Rare, KO-69, cobalt blue Burgons Cloudy Ammonia, with embossed elephant

Bottle 4: Extremely Rare, KU-7, aqua, O'Reilly's "Binocular" poison, patent 1905, also found in cobalt blue

Bottle 5: Extremely Rare cobalt blue Southerst poison, patent 1903

cities in the world. Here was a chance to experience England, visit three large antique shows and take in two bottle shows, all in a span of ten days. It was an opportunity I could not pass up.

I booked spaces for myself and my oldest son, Alex. To say we were excited about going would have been a gross understatement. I dreamed of Coffins, Wasp Waists, Binoculars, Crescents, Quines, Stars, Neuralines, Submarines and Slugs; Oh my! Of Gilbertsons, Burgons, Wilsons, Tippers, Taylors, Martins and Lewis & Towers. Sleep was very enjoyable over the next few weeks, but the anticipation was almost unbearable. Would I have the chance to buy some of the more elusive English

intrigued I became with them. So much so, that I decided to take another trip to England and the highlight of this trip would be the Summer National, the largest bottle show in Britain. Unfortunately, the itinerary would be a northern focus of Great Britain and since Brian's collection resided in south London, I would not be able to see the collection on this trip. That just meant I would have to take another jaunt over the pond. The Summer National is a great show with about 200 indoor tables and 50 to 60 outdoor tables. There were some impressive bottles at the show and once again, I would leave England with a suitcase full of glass, but, alas no Wasp Waists, no Binoculars, no Burgons, no Slugs and no Coffins. Once more these English rarities eluded me.

It had been about nine months since I had met Brian. We began to correspond and exchange information regarding English poisons. Brian was doing most of the exchanging, but every now and then, this ole Yank would have something to add to the conversations. Brian suggested that on my next visit to the UK, I come and see his poison collection and eat dinner with him and his wife, Sonia. I naturally accepted, but indicated that I was unsure of when I would be able to come. I had traveled to UK

twice in the last year and I wasn't sure how soon I would be able to go again. With the invitation as the motivation I scheduled another journey to the 2006 Summer National. I discussed my plans with Brian and we agreed to talk after the show on Sunday night. The 2006 Summer National was another great show. Although my finds were somewhat meager, I had a great time. I was able to meet and put some faces with the great people I had only corresponded with over the internet. I was able to enjoy the ambience of a small English pub while watching England play in the World

Cup. Let me assure you, if you haven't watched English football in an English pub, you haven't really experienced England. Although I was again able to fill a suitcase with glass, I knew deep down that I would probably never own several of the rarest English poisons. They were exceptionally rare, with one or two examples being known and they



Bottle 1: Extremely Rare, KU-7 cobalt blue O'Reilly's "Binocular" poison, patent 1905, two known in cobalt blue

Bottle 2: Ultra, Ultra Rare KU-2 cobalt blue 32 ounce Eclipse "Wasp Waist" poison, patent 1905, only one known, THE RAREST OF THE RARE, weighs in at two pounds. The Finest poison bottle in the World, Bar None!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bottle 3: Extremely Rare KU-2 variant cobalt blue Stephenson's "Wasp Waist" poison, patent 1894. Notice the absence of the hobnails, this is the earlier version of the Eclipse

Bottle 4: Very Rare KU-6, cobalt blue Walker-Martin "Submarine" poison, patent 1906

weren't going anywhere. But now, I would finally have the opportunity to enjoy the next best alternative – a chance to see them, hold them, appreciate them and inquire as to their history.

Jonathan Melnick and I left the Summer National and made our way back to Heathrow airport. We hauled our suitcases down to the train tunnel and caught the Heathrow Express to Paddington Station. It was a short cab ride past Hyde Park where The Who would be playing later that afternoon, to our hotel at Charing Cross. We checked into the hotel room and I placed the all

important phone call to Brian. On the following day, we would take the 1 o'clock train from Charing Cross station to south London, where Brian would meet us at 1:30 at the Lee station. The meeting was set.

Nearly 18 months after our initial introduction, it was less than 24 hours until I had the opportunity of a lifetime – a chance to see one of the best poison collections in England, if not the world. Jonathan and I were absolutely beside ourselves. The question now was how to make the time pass as quickly as possible, before the anticipation drove us crazy. Fortunately for us, we were in London, a city where there is a multitude of attractions to keep you busy.

The 1 o'clock departure time finally came and we were off on the train headed to Lee. Our conversation was, of course, focused on the collection and what we would see, hold and caress. Would we have the great fortune to see and hold some of the rarest poisons known? All questions would be answered in short order. The train was pulling into Lee. We exited the train and walked down the ramp to the street. A short time later, Brian pulled up and we were off to the house. Along the way, Brian asked about our trip and I could tell by the tone of his voice that

he was almost as excited to have us as we were to be there. We arrived at the house and were introduced to Brian's charming wife, Sonia. The first thing that struck me about Brian's and Sonia's living room was there were no bottles. There was a display of small of Doulton stone ware, but, not a single bottle. In my early collecting days, there were bottles all over the house. Over time with the introduction of a wife and children, my collection has migrated entirely to the safe confines of my office.

Was there a bottle room, a room totally devoted to the collection? Sonia

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offered us some lemonade or water and I chose the latter. Brian led us up the stairs where my question was answered. It wasn't a bottle room, it was a bottle museum! The walls across from the door were painted with stoneware of all kinds, colored print and colored top ginger beers, ammonias, one that was studded with hobnails, black glass beers, aqua Codd's with red, blue and green lips, vividly colored dumpies and aqua Hamiltons. The floor along the walls was blanketed with huge flagons and foot warmers of various sizes and manufacturers. To the right were four cabinets of mostly English poisons, grouped mostly by color. From this distance, I could not pick out any of the super rarities, but that would soon change. On my immediate right were the colored Codd's and Hamiltons in different shades of cobalt, green and amber. I don't know much about these particular bottles; however, anyone with even a vague knowledge of Codd's and Hamiltons could recognize the quality resting on these shelves. I hadn't even sat down and I was already in overload mode.

Sonia brought up the water and lemonade and we sat down and began to chat about Brian and the collection. For those of you who aren't familiar with Brian Thatcher and his poison collection, I will give you a little background. Brian has been collecting bottles for about 25 years. Unlike most of us, he got started collecting due to a most unusual sequence of events. "Early one morning whilst working as a Metropolitan police officer, I was chasing a suspected car thief across a field. I tripped over an old bottle that was poking up out of the ground and fell on top of the suspect and arrested him. The field turned out to be an Edwardian rubbish tip and I subsequently obtained permission to do some digging. It contained a fair number of poisons mostly common, but I was immediately attracted to them." Well, the rest is history and the results lay before us.

There were around 5,000 poisons in front of us and I wanted to see and hold every last one of them. It was now about 2:30 and I had not held a bottle, and I was completely overwhelmed. It was time to take a couple of deep breaths and gather myself. Brian started on the left side of the poison collection. I believe that was the aqua cabinet. Now normally when someone brings out aqua poisons, I don't get too excited; however, when Brian brought out an aqua Binoculars, my heart stuttered. This was the first of the many rare poisons to grace my



- Bottle 1: Scarce KU-20, aqua Martins, patent 1902, also found in ice blue and green**
- Bottle 2: Extremely Rare KT-7, Dowells poison, "Slug", patent 1911, two known, amber & green**
- Bottle 3: Rare KU-5, Clear Gilbertons poison, "Wedge", patent 1861, also found in green**
- Bottle 4: Scarce, KU-3, Ice Blue Quines poison, patent 1894, also found in Aqua**

hands that day. Ever since I read Roy Morgan's poison book, I had wanted to own this bottle. Now I was enjoying the next best alternative – I was holding and examining this beauty. Then Brian brought out a clear Gilbertson's, several Martins, including a 20-ounce and a half-ounce – both stunners, several Quines in a beautiful ice blue color. What a fantastic start to what would turn out to be one of the most remarkable days in my 32 years of collecting.

After an hour or so of handling the aqua and clear poisons, we moved to the cobalt cabinet – home to the 32 ounce Wasp Waist, Binoculars, Submarines, Skulls, Stars, Yapoo's Southerst and the Burgon's Elephant Ammonia. The cobalt

poisons have always had a special allure for me and so with great anticipation Brian pulled out the 32-ounce Eclipse, the Wasp Waist, the King of all poison bottles. It is difficult to fully appreciate Brian's favorite bottle until you have the pleasure of holding this treasure in your hands. And, yes, I gripped this five-figure poison with two hands at all times. The sensuous wasp-waist shape, indicative of a corseted Victorian belle, the oversized hobnail protrusions on three sides, POISON embossed on both sides in a subtle arch at the top and the sheer size of this poison (9.875 inches tall, 4.25 inches wide and 2.5 inches deep, weighing in at a hefty two pounds) constitutes the finest example of an English poison design. This 32-ounce specimen was initially exported to India, then found its way to Australia where it was purchased for £250 and returned to the UK. It sat on a shelf for five years until the owner decided to try and sell it. It was sold to a friend of Brian's, who fortunately for Brian decided to sell it to him. Finally after 24 years of collecting poisons, I was able to hold, caress and examine that beautiful beast.

Once I held this unique poison bottle, and, yes, to date this is the only one known, I didn't want to let go. But, there were other rarities waiting to be fondled, so it was time to move on. The cobalt Binoculars and the Burgon's ammonia were next to come out of the cabinet. The Binocular poison, as the name implies, is shaped like a pair of binoculars. Although somewhat simple in design compared to the Eclipse, there was something about this bottle that made it very pleasing to the eye. The unique shape and having POISON embossed three times certainly contributed to the eye appeal as well as the five figure price tag. The Burgons is one of two English poisons that has an animal – in this case, an elephant embossed on the front; the other being the Cyona, which has a horse embossed on the front. There are only a handful of

the cobalt Burgons to be found in all of England. These pricey little elephants will command four figures if you can find one.

Well, it is now approaching 6 p.m. and time for the evening meal. Sonia had prepared a wonderful English dinner for us and it was time to help her bring this sumptuous repast to the table on the patio. As we enjoyed our dinner, it was hard to believe that we were in south London. The quaint and peaceful garden provided a much needed moment of relaxation.

It was time to share stories about family and various bottle collecting escapades. It was fascinating to hear Brian recount many of his bottle digging and collecting stories. After listening to these epic tales, it gave me a much better appreciation for the amount of dedication and effort that went into compiling these outstanding collections. Great collections do not happen by chance. They are the result of long hours of arduous work and devotion. I also enjoyed hearing Brian describe his 30-year career as a police officer in London. It's no surprise to those of us that know Brian, that his time as a police officer was a mirror image of his life as a poison collector. Do the two seem unrelated? Not to me. In order to be successful at either, you have to be diligent, devoted and approach the task at hand with a level of passion that assures success. Feeling rejuvenated, it was now time for the final assault on the bottle room.

As we settled back into our seats in the bottle room, we realized that it was almost 7:30. The last train from Lee to Charing Cross station leaves at 9 p.m. Due to the lack of time left before we had to catch our train, Brian suggested that we take a 9:30 train from a different station. That would give Jonathan and me an extra 30 minutes to view the remaining 4,900 bottles. No easy task, but, we were up to the challenge. It was mutually decided to just look at the rarest of the rare during the remaining hour and a half. It would be a world wind event with bottles coming fast and furious.

The first to come off the shelf was the infamous Slug, similar to the Gilbertson's Wedge, the Martins and the Quines in that

they were designed to lie flat, rather than stand upright. This feature made them extremely difficult to tip over and spill the contents. However, the similarities end there with this magnificent amber bottle being embossed with cross-hatching over the upper part of the body and sides with a smooth space on top for a label. The base is embossed in large letters, WARNING, POISON. A few years ago parts of a cobalt example were found. Brian describes this bottle as the UK's and possibly the world's rarest poison. I held this bottle for quite some time, examining every facet in great detail, a truly extraordinary poison. The next poison to be inspected was the green 20-ounce Taylors – one of my favorites. The front panel has "NOT TO BE TAKEN" embossed vertically downwards. Adjacent panels angle steeply away and are covered with raised bumps. The rounded back is embossed "CAUTION" across the top with the registration number 469210 across the bottom. What is very interesting about this bottle is a variant that has rows of raised bumps along the rear panel below the word Caution and above the registration number. They also come in a variety of green colors, from a deep teal green to a pale grass green and one cobalt blue example, which I had the pleasure of seeing at the Summer National in 2006.

The cobalt Taylors was a real stunner and one that I would pay dearly for to add to my poison collection. Brian then brought out the 13-plus-inch, vertically ribbed cobalt blue cylinder with POISON embossed diagonally across the front. It was a huge poison that was hauntingly familiar as I had purchased an olive-green example several years earlier from Glass Works Auction. I asked Brian if he had ever seen an olive-green example and he replied, "I have never seen or heard of one." To make a long story shorter, because this short story has now been going on for seven pages, the olive-green poison now sits on Brian's shelf.

One of the last poison groups we had a chance to peruse was the Wilsons - a triangular shaped bottle with serrated corners. It comes in a variety of sizes from the teeny half-ounce, 2.75 inches to the massive 20-ounce, 7.5 inches. They usually come in shades of green, with

a number of variations in the wording. There is one example, a remarkable poison, that would be the center piece of most poison collections.

Unfortunately, our time had run out. It was 9:10 and if we wanted to make it back to London, we would have to leave at once. Jonathan and I would have gladly stayed and slept on the bottle museum floor, but alas, it was not to be. We made it to the train station with a few minutes to spare. We said our "Thanks" and "Goodbyes", but somehow words seemed utterly and completely inadequate. The train ride back to London was quiet and subdued. I was overwhelmed, overloaded and totally drained all at the same time. My brain was numb. Not until I wrote this article did I begin to comprehend the magnitude of what I had seen. My research brought back those fond memories of Brian's poison collection that for so long lay dormant in that mass of grey matter (called my brain).

It is extremely difficult to put into words what an incredible experience it was. There aren't enough superlatives in the English language to express how grateful I am to Brian and Sonia. It was such an absolute pleasure and privilege to share that day with the two of the most generous and considerate people I have ever met. For this poison collector, it was truly Paradise.

In closing, I want to encourage all bottle collectors to share their collections. Remember, it's the people who make the collections and their willingness to share that knowledge, information and enthusiasm with others. Without it our hobby would surely die. So I will close this long-winded narrative with a bit of advice from a wellknown poison collector.

"Learn as much as possible about what you collect. It will help identify quality items and it will add to the pleasure of the collection. Put as much effort into displaying items as into collecting them. Don't be swayed by the latest fashion or fad in the bottle world, buy it because you like it and buy one quality bottle rather than 10 lesser bottles."

Wise words from a VERY WISE MAN!