

John Ault, England's Bottle King

At 68, he's no slug when it comes to catching snails

Ralph Finch quickly asks:

Have snails always been popular with collectors? Well, yes and no. Once, maybe twelve years ago, in a little restaurant just off the square of the 14th-century Palace of the Popes in Avignon, in southern France, I asked the sweetie I was with if she'd like an order of escargot. "YUCH," she replied, reacting as if I had suggested that she eat a snail.

After much coercing, and with her cute face squinched up, she said she'd try just one, but she wasn't happy about it.

The result? Janet finished her order, and mine, and the next evening we went back to the restaurant for another round of escargot, snails cooked in garlic butter and served on a special silver dish. (Often, you can get them served in shells.)

Recently, on Facebook, John Ault, perhaps England's premier collector/researcher, wrote: "Basically, I'm aged 20, but trapped in a 68-year-old car wreck of a body."

John explained: "I really missed my aqua glass version of a snail ink bottle when I swapped a load of inks for a little Vickery bears grease pot a few years ago, so when

this bottle came up in auction, Mary offered to buy it as a Christmas pressie.

"She's not a bad ole *stick; I think she might be a keeper." (*"Stick" in English slang, implies attachment by affixing or by being glued together. And, a "snail" is a common antique shape of inkwell, often found in Europe.)

John Ault later added: "The snail inks are French, c.1880. My cobalt version is the only known example, it turned up on eBay a few years ago, bidding was fierce, but I eventually won it for my £1,200 maximum bid. A lot of money, but there again it's a lot of bottle!

"My tiny bears grease pot from 'Vickery Bishops Gate Street & Tavistock Street' with the wonderfully naive image of a bear can be dated from between 1786, when William Vickery opened his 6 Tavistock Street warehouse (which appears on the pot), and 1790, when the Cheapside address is mentioned in period adverts.

"This piece was from the Ben Swanson collection dispersed by Harmer Rooke Galleries New York in 1990. It was the star of the auction and after fierce bidding it was won by Peter Savage, who eventual-



"There is one other Vickery pot known," says John Ault, and it was sold by Sotheby's London in 2006 for \$14,600 plus buyer's premium.



John Ault has an appetite for antique escargot.

ly passed it on to yours truly after a swap involving the majority of my teakettle ink collection.

"Prior to that, the pot was owned by Louis L. Lipski. He was a Polish expatriate who accumulated a huge collection during the 1940s and 1950s, at that time most of this type of pottery could be bought for just a few pounds.



If you found these slithering in your yard, would you really complain?



This fancy French porcelain snail inkwell was offered on the internet ... but can you only write letters in French?



John Ault must have been a good boy, having gotten this Christmas gift from his wife, Mary.



Offered on the internet recently was this nice English snail set.

Eventually Lipski, together with Michael Archer, co-authored the highly respected English Delftware book, which in itself is highly collectable.

“When he died in 1978 Sotheby’s London was offered the chance to dispose of his vast collection. It was eventually divided into four separate sales, and in order not to flood the market his items were sold off over a period of two and a half years. These sales created a great deal of excitement amongst academics plus collectors alike, and led to a huge leap in values once the rarity of the pieces were fully realised.

“There is one other Vickery pot known, which was in the late Dr. Anne Young’s collection and sold by Sotheby’s London in 2006 for \$14,600 plus buyer’s premium.

“I have been married to Mary for 46 years; she was 18 when we married. People got hitched so young back then. We looked like children!

“Ralph, you spend about the same amount of time on the computer (six-plus hours a day) as I do; Mary puts up with a lot, but she gets engrossed in her crafting hobbies. We are both very passionate in our interests.

John’s final message to us: “Keep safe. Locked down here in Gravesend, roll on the vaccine!”

FYI: On the internet I found a website for “Exotic Snails,” which are kept as pets.

If you want to contact Ralph, or slug him, email rfinch@twmi.rr.com.

