



# A one-man Heritage Mission

BY:  
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The name Charles Brooking is one that should trip off the tongue of anyone keen to achieve the very best in a period house renovation, and a name that should be known to all people who live in and love old houses.

Charles, 54, has devoted his life to amassing a vast collection of architectural detailing and artifacts of all kinds.

So compulsive is his mania for collecting them that his collection now numbers around 400, 000 items. A recent check indicated that the number of items in store and awaiting cataloguing is about to exceed that figure.

There are windows and doors, fireplaces, period door handles, knobs and knockers of all periods, fanlights, door furniture, rainwater heads, boot scrapers skirting boards, dados, picture rails, and timber mouldings of all ages, shapes and sizes

What Charles does not know about these items simply isn't worth

**Main image:**  
Part of the  
staircase collection

**Above:**  
Charles with  
his collection

knowing. Ask him about any of these and a seamless rush of dates, erudition, and anecdotes flows endlessly out.

For running his collection Charles gets no grant and no direct assistance from the government. Top of his priorities is to establish some sort of permanent home for the collection, which is currently spread over two sites 50 miles apart and is housed in 21 different buildings.

His home for the past ten years - he shares it with his partner, Susan Beardmore - is what he calls "a bland poky little 1960s suburban house" in a quiet cul-de-sac in Cranleigh, Surrey. It was formerly occupied by a man who ran a building business, and at the rear, in a 45 ft by 25ft former carpenters' workshop is The Brooking Home Study Collection. The display is crammed with neatly-labelled exhibits, ranging from windows of all periods to fire surrounds and inserts from four centuries, doors, rainwater goods, ➤





**Above:**  
A variety of  
pieces from  
the collection

sections of internal staircases, ironmongery and domestic stained glass.

But this collection of several thousand items is only the tip of the iceberg. On the other side of the drive are 14 former lock-up garages full of items awaiting cataloguing. And as if this is not all, the greater part of the collection is housed in a huge warehouse on a university campus in south London.

If, as a period house owner, you have a difficult 'matching' problem - from fireplaces to fanlights, skirting boards to sash pulleys - Charles is your man. It is possible to consult Charles or to visit the collection by attending one of his 'private view' Saturdays, at which you can be one of a small number of people who can ask Charles anything you like about the history of your house and whatever concerns you about its sympathetic restoration.

If you are prepared to try your luck on the telephone (he has no email and the computer system he has

owned for several years lies in three boxes in his study) Charles is always willing to lend a sympathetic ear to period house owners - if you can catch him. A typical recent example was the gentleman he advised on the authentic restoration of a mid-Georgian rectory in Gloucestershire he had bought, that had had all its plaster cornices and firegrates ripped out.

When it comes to sash pulleys there is nobody to touch Charles for depth of knowledge. He explains: "Sliding vertical and horizontal sash windows were introduced, first in the royal palaces, from the 1670s onwards. The design of sash pulleys was constantly changing, as casting techniques improved and manufacturers came up with ever-improved styles and designs." It is estimated that, from the joinery and the fittings he can date a sash window to within three years of its manufacture.

In one of the buildings at the rear of his home that house part of his

collection he has an amazing 25,000 sash window pulleys.

The English sash window is by no means Charles' prime area of expertise. He is also an authority on cast iron and steel windows and has the only study collection of Crittall and Crittall-style windows in the country.

However windows are his first love. A few years ago, when a major refurbishment to 10 Downing Street was underway, it was Charles Brooking that was asked to date all the windows in the house. He followed this with a similar exercise at the Sir John Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

Today he not only has the former garden door from 10 Downing Street, but also Pugin panelling from the Palace of Westminster, sash window and door sections from Buckingham Palace, and some pieces from Windsor Castle from the time of its restoration after the 1992 fire.

In-between sorting and cataloguing his vast collection - he is always





**Above:**  
Stained glass  
window collection

desperate for volunteer helpers - Charles is continually dashing around the country carrying out 'rescues'. On the day I visited him he had just had a local triumph. "I was driving through Cranleigh and spotted a beautiful oriel window being removed from one of the few remaining Victorian frontages," he said. "All the components were in the back of a van waiting to be trashed, so I rescued them. Around here wonderful houses with splendid Arts and Crafts interiors are biting the dust week by week."

Before that he was working on rescuing panelling, doors and windows from buildings about to disappear on the Royal Infirmary site at Worcester, and the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, where conducted the rescue of an unusual interesting set of windows from an old Victorian workhouse before the demolition squads arrived.

Recently Charles was only able to rescue a high quality oak staircase of the 1720s from a supposedly mid-Victorian house at Egham in Surrey

because of a last minute intervention by SAVE Britain's Heritage. The charity donated an immediate £500 to hire a van and a skilled joiner to go post haste to the site and carry out the removal.

"Money is always a huge problem," explains Charles, who, despite his boyish shock of hair wears a constantly harassed look. "I exist on two massive loans and a little bit of consultancy work for English Heritage and The National Trust, plus my salary as a part-time lecturer at the University of Greenwich. In term time Charles conducts workshop sessions one day a week. They cover the broad general topics of windows, doors, cast iron and staircases. The greater part of his collection is housed in a huge warehouse on one of the university's campuses.

"I exist in a state of permanent fear for the future financial viability of the collection," says Charles, with an air of compelling urgency. He wears a perpetual air of being overwhelmed, although the constant stream of

words that is his conversation is as packed with hilarious anecdotes as much as with apparently effortless erudition.

But to his great credit he has never lost his schoolboy enthusiasm, which is probably why he had never allowed himself to be diverted from his major task of rescuing countless items of architectural interest for the nation and providing a permanent home for them.

When they are not wandering what the latest large lorry arriving late at night at his overcrowded home in a sleepy suburban cul de sac contains, residents of The Drive must sometimes think their neighbour obsessive to the point of total dottiness.

Charles does not like the word "dotty". He does not even like 'eccentric' preferring to be labelled 'unconventional'.

Unconventional or other wise, he surely belongs to the grand British tradition of genial obsessives, from the great Victorian lepidoptera collectors





**Above:**  
Charles' home  
study

**Right:**  
A selection of  
door furniture  
pieces and Fire  
grate

to eccentric aristocrats, inventors and academics.

In the words of Sir William McAlpine, chairman of The Brooking Architectural Museum Trust, which is trying to raise £7m. for a permanent home that will bring the entire collection under one roof: "Charles Brooking and the situation he finds himself in is something that could only be found in England. I shall never forget the day when Charles rescued a very large window from the former Chinese embassy and took it home on the bus!"

On a more serious note Sir William says: "The Brooking Collection is a hugely important resource to the country as well as to the restoration industry. It is of important educational

value, and a vital source of reference for future generations. All this should make it a prime candidate for support from the Heritage Lottery Fund."

Today, Charles he says he has never been working harder rescuing items of our architectural heritage that he considers under threat.

At least there is limited good news on the permanent home front. Last year the Brooking Architectural Museum Trust and Greenwich University concluded an agreement to site an office, teaching area, display space and store at Hadlow College near Tonbridge, Kent. An Appeal is to be launched.

Charles said: "We are moving forward, but it is desperately slow - particularly in the current economic



situation. Until a permanent home is established my nightmare scenario is still that I might die and all this will just be considered an eccentric's hobby."

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

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