

Vision Becomes Reality

FOR TOLKIEN COLLECTOR

As told to Collectors News

In rural Chester County, Pa., lives a Tolkien enthusiast who takes his collection very seriously. It all started with a childhood interest in the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien in the 1960s. John Smith's* father, a high school English teacher, gave him a humble paperback edition of one of Tolkien's works. His father's background and knowledge of middle English literature helped him understand references and allusions to other myths, and helped develop Smith's appreciation. Initially, his interest did not go beyond *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit House*, but as time went on, his interest grew and he became wrapped up in the "thrill of the hunt" with which many collectors identify. Today, John Smith is the proud owner of a complete replica "Hobbit House" to display his collection of Tolkien memorabilia.

After reading *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien's lifework that was published posthumously and edited by his son, Christopher), Smith, who has a background in mythology and anthropology, wanted to find out more about Tolkien. Throughout the 1970s Smith delved deeper into the small world of Tolkien literary criticism, literary character-based collectibles, jigsaw puzzles, figurines, and other Tolkien-related items. Both the literary side and entertainment side factored into his interest.

In the early 1990s, Smith's job began to require international travel. While abroad, he browsed bookstores for editions of Tolkien's works in foreign languages. He found there was more of a following in European countries like Sweden, Italy, and Hungary than in the United States. To many in England, Tolkien is considered the greatest author of the 20th century, to others, he is considered simply a children's author. Asian works in China and Taiwan were harder to find in Mandarin characters. For Smith, the thrill of the chase became more exciting than the collection itself.

Through the Internet, Smith met other enthusiasts. For instance, the Tolkien Society in England studies the literary value of the works. Through eBay, Smith's wife began finding more items to add to his collection, posters, calendars, and original artworks by artists like Allen Lee and Ted Nasmith. Although the Internet provided a platform for Tolkien enthusiasts to chat, interact, and purchase items for their collections, it was not until 2005, when the Tolkien Society sponsored an event, that many had the chance to meet enthusiasts face-to-face.

The event commemorated the 50th anniversary of the completion of the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy in 1955. Smith traveled to England to attend the event, along with over 750 people from 23 countries. The event had something for everyone: professionals as well as fans and enthusiasts. Included were an art show, an opportunity for many discussions, and a trip to Tolkien's home and the pub where Tolkien's literary discussion group, The Inklings (which included authors like C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, and Robert Har-



"It had a perfectly round door like a porthole ... with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle." The Hobbit House.

vard) met on a regular basis. The event also included a touching visit to the gravesite where Tolkien and his wife are buried.

Because of his long-lived appreciation for Tolkien literature and collectibles, Smith's personal collection grew steadily through the years. When he moved into his current home in 1986, his collection remained in a growing number of boxes. With such large quantities, Smith found it difficult to appreciate his collection. He wanted to hold his books and enjoy the interpretations of the events and characters, a feat that was nearly impossible with his collection boxed up. Smith's home just happened to have a nice bank in the back and in the 1990s he joked "maybe I should build a hobbit hole here."

He began considering it more seriously and about five years ago, called an architect he had worked with. He asked the architectural firm Archer & Buchanan Architects, Ltd., based in West Chester, Pa. if he would like to help him design a "hobbit house," not just a hole in the ground, but a building structure reminiscent of Tolkien's descriptions. Tolkien's works were filled with building descriptions, so Smith had no shortage of inspiration for architectural features. When they started discussing materials, they decided that it should be a stone building made of all natural materials. They used stone from old stone walls buried in the ground on the farmland. The entire house is made of materials found on the property, part from the land, and part from their home. Construction began in September of 2004. Smith recounts that he was fortunate to have excellent contractors for the entire



project. Their enthusiasm for such a unique project carried them through and kept them motivated.

The most unique item in his collection is a one-of-a-kind piece. Smith has had correspondence with a man who lived in England in a cottage called "Fern Cottage" that was once a Tolkien residence. The man made a plaster replica of Fern Cottage including the wall around it and a couple of items in the yard. The replica is hand crafted and painted. The piece is special because it claims both unique and attractive qualities.

Smith's collection is meaningful to him. He suggests that collectors of all types be enthusiastic about the meaning behind each collection and the experience of collecting instead of focusing solely on the items in the collection. "There is nothing like a collection that means something to you. Each piece adds to the experience of collecting." He also believes in finding others who share the same enthusiasm. Sharing your enthusiasm adds to the collecting experience. Smith shares his collecting with his wife. She helps him search for items and is very supportive of his passion.

Now that Smith has the Hobbit House, he can enjoy his collection that includes 1,000 printed editions of Tolkien's, his



"There was a fire in the wide hearth before them ... and a pair of candles at each end of the chimney-shelf." A description of Tom Bombadil's house from The Fellowship of the Ring.

Above left: Smith used all natural materials found on his farmland to create the Hobbit House.

Above right: "A preference for round windows, and even round doors, was the chief peculiarity of hobbit-architecture." The Fellowship of the Ring.

works, criticisms, works in foreign languages, popular works, and magazine articles. It also includes 1,700 items including chess sets, toys, figurines, role-playing games, original artwork, and posters. Now that he has the room, Smith can display most of his collection. His books are on display upstairs, and the lower level serves for storage.

"I try to get in the house every other weekend, where I do additional work on the collection," Smith says. "I use a software program "Readerware," a cataloging database, because my collection outgrew a manual list." The software is designed for libraries, but is appropriate for any tracking number, and has room for a picture of each item.

Although he has built an entire house to hold his collection, Smith is still looking for missing pieces, while spending time enjoying what he has. As a collector, Smith has a great passion for the thrill of the hunt, and as an enthusiast, he sets the bar for Tolkien collectors.

*The name of this collector has been changed by *Collectors News* to protect his privacy.