

**Bornoff's rural ride:** on Cup Final Saturday, May 14, Claude Bornoff (left) drove 300 miles in 13 hours, visited ten shops, spent £5 on petrol, 5s. 5d. on a packet of 20 Rothman's, £270 on antiques, and crashed his Mercedes avoiding a puppy. "What tinny carriage work," said Claude, "I am disappointed. I loved that car." Apart from the accident, the day was a typical one.

Bornoff sets off at dawn at least once a week, and usually returns late the following day, sometimes the evening after. His assistant follows in his tracks, keeping in constant touch by telephone. His job is to collect the larger purchases in a small pantechicon.

When the furniture van returns, there is usually a coterie of dealers waiting. Some sip coffee in his shop, others sit quietly in their cars outside; the phone rings incessantly. "Hallo, Claude, had a good trip? Er — anything for me? Ah, has John seen it? No, good, I'll be along in ten minutes."

Bornoff stands anxiously in his shop. He is an appallingly bad salesman, but unfailingly polite. It is quite obvious that he wished he didn't have to sell the nicer pieces. People carry furniture in: a great heavy bookcase, a statue, a tea chest containing a chandelier in pieces. He waves his arms, as though conducting a piece of chamber music. "Careful with the china, Michael. I'm sorry David, how much is what? Oh, yes, it's dear I'm afraid, I was stupid, but I've never seen one so clean. It cost £85, I'll take a tenner if you want it. All right then, £92 10s., shall I send it over, or will you take it?" By 7 p.m. it's all over, and Bornoff slips off to his wife and his dinner; he is devoted to both.

He started collecting at Cranleigh school, and was destined for a musical career, but missed a scholarship to the R.C.M. National Service didn't help his ambitions. In his vague way he finished up in a Guards band. "Though I must point out," he says, "I was a solo pianist."

On leaving the Army, he started buying and selling small, easily portable things. When he was 27, with the help of a modest loan from his father, he opened his shop at Chestow Corner in Bayswater. Music still dominates his life; there is a piano installed in the basement of the shop. His other loves are the English countryside and food.

He makes his trips in all weathers, finding enchantment in all seasons. Reluctantly he admits he plans his trips to take him past a good restaurant at the appropriate time. One of the legends in the trade is that at a famous eating contest between dealers at the Clarence Hotel in Exeter, Claude won with a score of 24 veal cutlets, four Dover soles and five crêpes Suzettes, washed down with the appropriate wines. He is modest about it: "That was a few years ago. Now, with income tax as it is, I stay on a diet."

He is a tall, round, soft-faced man with tonsure-like balding hair. Everything about him

is smooth and gentle, the tweedy clothes, the well-polished slipper shoes, the voice, the almost too-courteous manner. Only when a dealer quotes too high a price or misdescribes his goods, does his face freeze, his eyes glisten; he says nothing. The effect is quiet and menacing, like a lizard that has just snapped its jaws shut on a fly. Almost invariably he intimidates his prey to lower their prices.

Bornoff deals, mainly, in furniture where the largest profit lies, but says he will try anything. "I may be foolish, possibly indulgent, but I do not want to specialise in any one line. I love beauty. I want to buy beautiful things. I can't resist them, and love to possess them if only for a brief moment. It's a joy. So I can never discipline myself. The height of my ambition is to know a little about everything. And all the time I am learning. English enamelware, yes, that I really know about. I would never be fooled with it. But otherwise I like to gamble. It makes me lose money often, but then at other times I gain."

His customers are mostly others in the trade, private collectors, and the odd private customers who find their way to his overcrowded and untidy shop. Like many dealers, he really prefers to deal with those who know what they want, and abhors the dilettante.

His sources are the people who write asking him to call and offer a price for something they have to sell. He likes to burrow deep into the provincial dealers' circuit.

The routine is not to bother with auction sales, which he regards as time-wasting. He continually circulates around his network of country dealers, all of whom now know his taste, and with some of whom he holds a special relationship, trusting their judgment if they describe a piece over the telephone, and accepting their assurances on provenance or validity. When he calls they open up after hours, lunch him on a Sunday, and even stop watching the Cup Final on TV to pad out in their carpet slippers with a flurry of greetings.

His technique is to stroll about the shops like a soft-footed Groucho Marx, his eyes flicking about. He will pounce suddenly. "How much are you asking for that?" "£65 to you, Claude." "Umm, pictures are getting dear these days." The lizard look but no response. He fondles some china, pinging the edges with a thumb nail, listening attentively for the clear ring denoting that there are no cracks. "Those are £25 for three pieces — they are perfect."

Claude is silent, and continues to ping, louder and louder. The dealer's façade begins to crumble. "I could ease it a bit . . ." "Give you £20," interjects Claude, with superb timing. Within minutes the china is paid for, packed and nestling in the back of the Mercedes. "That was Oriental Lowestoft and

worth it, even though one of the bits is hair-cracked," he says. "It's green and my customers like the colour. I shall sell it for about £24-£25."

The day slips by, talking, testing china, feeling furniture, assessing pictures, calling mostly at predetermined places. Occasionally the Mercedes screeches to a halt as he sees something in a shop window. Claude is out of the car and in the shop almost before the car has stopped and usually back just as quickly. "Saw that card-table last month in Norfolk, but it hadn't got brass inlay then." A William IV piece had become Regency. "You have to be very careful with brass inlaid furniture, the real stuff has the brass set in a tiny fillet of rosewood, never ever straight into the mahogany, whether it is a chair back or a table."

Dealers who specialise in dealing with the public are the ones with fitted carpets and chandeliers in their shops. Often they have to give credit, or let things out for some time on approval. That's why the prices are so high as to be in many cases quite ridiculous. Bornoff is far too polite to say why, but like most real dealers he prefers to deal with the trade. "It's really only logical. We all have our outlets, we are pitting our knowledge against the other man's. It's a gamble, and things get sorted out that way. A fiver here, a fiver there, no one really makes a massive profit. We know what we want, and we are quick about it. No messing about, indecisiveness or 'keep it for a week and I'll ask the wife'. Those dealers who specialise in selling to the public earn their money. I have some charming private customers, and I get to know them, their homes, and their children, but usually they are people who know what they want, and love antiques for their own sake."

The trouble with the antique trade, according to Bornoff, is that the British are a poor nation who cannot afford to indulge their collectors' instincts. Therefore most of the really good stuff goes to America, or to the larger Continental dealers. There is also a terrible shortage of good stuff, which forces up the prices, and makes real antique dealing terribly hard work. It is a continual hunt — an adventure — and a gamble trying to find the real thing. "Most of the antique shops these days sell the most frightful rubbish, or so-called with-it oddments. In the heart of the trade there is very little real crookery, because anyone so inclined would lose his reputation if he tried it on with another dealer."

To maintain his operation, he has to try to turn his capital over many times a year — "the small profit for a quick return". He is ruthless with his mistakes, knocking them out for a loss to free the money. He is coy on what he actually makes. "You could say I make slightly more than a good first violin — but that only shows how badly we pay musicians."