



Margaret Smith with Jemima and Louisa.

## A collector's 'way of life' became a business

**NOT** much observance is required to note from Alresford's shop windows, that perhaps its most prolific trade is that of antiques. Ten months ago, yet another business of this type opened in the town, at Beresford House, Pound Hill.

This new establishment, which possibly fails to conform with most people's idea of an antique shop, is the result of the efforts of Margaret and Vernon Smith. No pretty, bow-fronted window for them, no signs, no highly polished air of reverence within. As Margaret herself says, they could be described as the "Steptoes of Alresford", with a dummy and various exhibits spilling out on to the pavement.

To many, the name of Margaret Smith needs no introduction. She already holds a wide reputation as a lecturer and costume collector, particularly of the Victorian period. She gives approximately seventy lectures a year, plus the occasional radio and television appearance.

### A WAY OF LIFE

The daughter of a naval officer and professional lecturer, Margaret's early life bordered on the eccentric. Money was in short supply, and her father spent much of his time in the Caledonian market, from which source their home was furnished with

"finds". "Collecting" was a natural way of life. Her fascination in clothing stemmed from a visit at an early age, to her aunt in Twickenham. Here she would be given old clothes with which to play dressing-up. From wearing old gowns, and simply touching these remnants of the past, sprung the desire to know more about the people who had worn them, and about their world. She started to collect gowns from every possible source.

With an eye on stage designing as a career, Margaret attended Kingston Art School, but then came war, and service in the WRNS. Once the war was over, she worked for a theatrical costumier in London.

At the time of their marriage, Vernon had no knowledge whatever of antiques, but collecting is obviously a catching disease, and indeed both he and their three grown-up children are all collectors in some form or another. In Vernon's case, the subject is copper jelly moulds of which he has two hundred and fifty, possibly making him the largest private collector in this field in the United Kingdom.

### WERE FARMERS

For more than 20 years however, the costume collection, and hours spent at sales and auctions, remained purely a hobby. They were farmers. For ten years they had a farm at Farnham, and then moved to Hawkley near Petersfield, where they farmed for a further ten years. It was whilst at Hawkley, that Margaret gave her first full lecture on the subject of costumes, although she had given one talk previously at the Haslemere Flower Society.

This Hawkley venture, resulted in her receiving local press publicity.

Wanting to make a break from farming, Margaret and Vernon made a brief and unsuccessful interlude into the business of health, sauna and massage. It was then that they decided to turn their hobby into their business, for by now Margaret was well established as an expert lecturer on her subject.

If personality alone makes a business, then Beresford House is an assured success with Margaret's vibrant spirit and the warmth and enthusiasm which exudes from both her and Vernon. He deals with furniture, glass and copper, whilst Margaret deals with the costumes, jewellery and anything else. No heap of junk is cold-shouldered, indeed it is welcomed to their premises, for so often somewhere in that junk is a gem. The result is a veritable Aladdin's Cave into which the simply curious are as welcome as the compulsive collector. Even the dummies are bestowed with a sense of being — it is Jemima who stands outside, and Louisa who accompanies Margaret on her lectures.

### A MINI - MUSEUM

There is an eagerness about the Smith's to share with others the pleasure they gain from their treasures. It is this desire which has them working towards a new goal; to open a mini-museum on the premises. It is intended to show something in the region of 40 items a time, and to hold specialist exhibitions such as bustles, crinolines, baby-robos, lace and toys.

This new interest value should be a part of Alresford life in the very near future.

6th OCTOBER 1978

# FILTON FERRAND