

on the page

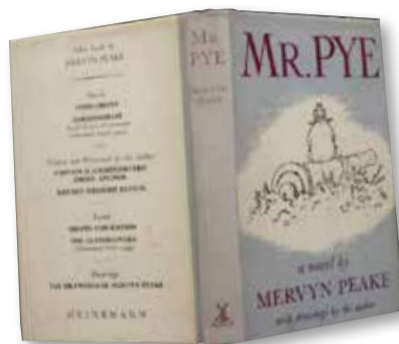
The world's largest collection of Mervyn Peake items is on eBay for £100,000. **Eric Dixon** meets the man who has been amassing the formerly Sark-based author's books, pamphlets and memorabilia for the past 35 years

Peake interest

TO CALL Michael Kemp a collector is to do him a disservice. Even describing him as 'avid' or 'passionate' in his hobby doesn't do him justice. When it comes to the work of Mervyn Peake – and by his own admission – he is nothing less than a 'fanatical completist'.

'It means that regardless of effort and cost, if something exists by Mervyn Peake that I haven't got, I have to have it,' he explains. 'In whatever form; if it's a variation of something I've already got or if it's a different edition, I have to have it.'

Kemp's obsession started when he was 18, after being given a copy of Peake's Gormenghast trilogy for his birthday by his father. He devoured all three books hungrily and was hooked, choosing also to read Mr Pye in the same year. But it wasn't until several years later, at the age of 25, that he started collecting. 'When I became a bookseller in 1979 it seemed natural, because I was selling books to collectors, that I should collect something myself,' he remembers, 'and I already had Gormenghast – although only in paperback. But then you realise that's not proper collecting. What you've got to do is try and get as close as you can to the author. So you want the first edition – his first view of it – and then subsequently I realised that was just the tip of the iceberg.' This realisation meant that Kemp felt compelled to collect not only the first edition of every book Peake produced (signed if possible), but also every proof of those first editions, every second edition, every first American edition, every illustrated edition, every folio society edition, and so on. At one stage he was even collecting such subtle variants (what are known as



A copy of Mr Pye, set in Sark, where Peake lived in the 1930s and '40s.

'issue points' in the trade), the differences amounted merely to the colour of the tops of pages – visible only when the book is closed.

Plus there are his poems (collections and single copies) as well as his plays – including the only known copy of his dramatic work, Those Wicked Doctors, which Kemp narrowly missed out on after underbidding for it at auction 20 years ago, but managed to acquire for £1,000 at another sale over 10 years later. Then there are the books that Peake didn't write but illustrated instead – such as childhood favourites Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Swiss Family Robinson and Treasure Island, as well as magazines like the Radio Times. And then again there are those about Mervyn Peake – biographies, periodicals, magazine articles, catalogues, even an eighth of a page in The Lyle Official Arts Review featuring the sale of one of his paintings.

'That's how complete it gets,' Kemp adds. 'It's got to be included because it's part of his published oeuvre, if you like.'

There are French editions, Italian editions. But even a 'fanatical completist' has to stop somewhere. 'I've stopped with foreign language

A pen and ink drawing from the endpaper of an original edition of Mr Pye.



Mervyn Peake collector Michael Kemp.

ones now,' he admits, 'because in the last 10 or 20 years it's been translated into so many different languages, it would just be non-stop.'

There's even an unusual Second World War propaganda postcard with caricatures of Mussolini and Hitler being married in bridal dress, along with the inscription 'Till death us do part' in Portuguese – of which only two copies are known to exist in the world. Along with Victor Hugo, Compton Mackenzie, and Gerald Durrell, Peake was one of the Channel Islands' most famous residents, living in Sark during two periods – first in the 1930s and again in the 1940s. It was where he wrote part of Gormenghast, and the island was the setting for Mr Pye – which was later adapted into a TV mini-series starring Derek Jacobi. 'I think he was taken by the landscape,' Kemp says pensively. 'There are lots of little landscapes that he drew there, so he liked that. He probably found it quite difficult from a social point of view, because it was a very conservative place and he was rather eccentric. He played on his eccentricity, really. Him and one of his friends left Sark to go to Guernsey to have their ears pierced – and that was terribly

progressive for men in those days, unless you were a pirate! 'And yet I think he liked the idea of going back. I think he thought it was ideal for children – quiet; no motor vehicles except tractors. Maybe he saw that as being idyllic.' Above all of his other work, it is Mr Pye that people most associate with the island – and in the Kemp collection there is a first edition copy of the title, signed (of course) along with the date of publication, 1953. In addition, on one of the endpapers Peake has drawn a unique ink sketch of Mr Pye standing on the Sark cliffs, looking out to sea.

Now aged 61, only a few items have eluded Michael Kemp's searches over the last three and a half decades – including a copy of the London Missionary Society magazine News from Afar.

He has one edition from November 1922, featuring a letter and illustration that Peake submitted to the editor from his home in China at the age of 11 – his first publication. But another letter in another edition of the same series has yet to be located. 'I've never seen that,' Kemp admits. So what does a 'fanatical completist' do when he decides to sell? The only answer is to sell the entire collection – all 500+ items – as a single lot. Kemp has no intention of splitting it up, regardless of how large the offers may be for any individual items within it. 'If it's going to be sold at all, it will be sold as a collection,' he says defiantly. 'Either to an institution that wants to study Peake as a whole, or to a collector who doesn't have the time to do what I spent 35 years doing.'



Peake's Letter from China appeared in News from Afar.