

Sheetlines

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“Kerry Musings”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

Kerry Musings

David Archer

If you change from being a map collector to a mapseller, you lose a hobby. Rubbish some say, a mapseller gets to see far more goodies than any of us, is the first to see or hear about most of the new discoveries and can keep whatever he or she wants, a hobby within a business. Rubbish again I say, when you spend all day handling and thinking about maps, the last hobby you want is map collecting. A hobby should be relaxing and enjoyable, something other than work, not an extension of the weekly grind, even if the grind is enjoyable. See a map, and one is back thinking of the boxes to be seen to on Monday, and the requests to check.

Yes, a mapseller does see some wonderful previously-unknown items, but is not allowed to get excited because he or she is supposed to know all about Ordnance Survey maps. A customer or someone with maps to sell expects a polite air of having seen it all before. Admit to having something new before you and their confidence is shaken, might you not be up to scratch, might your prices be too high or your offers too low? Get excited by a new acquisition and you risk becoming attached to it. Only when more knowledgeable friends show a discovery, can one can be animated, confess ignorance and then envy and offer praise. Surely part of collecting is the immediate excitement of a find, major or minor? Having to suppress feelings of pure joy until one gets home is not part of a hobby. The great moment has passed, hobby RIP. For a mapseller, the acquisition of stock, and constant pondering of where one might find maps is identical to collecting, but on a larger scale, meaning relaxation must be found elsewhere.

Yes, I did add to my accumulation of maps whilst trading, but literally that, just added, maps were put in the box with the others and the lid closed. A collector enjoys poring over new acquisitions and absorbing them, both into the collection and emotionally. I was unable to do this; again, too much like work. So when it looked like closing time for the business, I wondered whether I could regain a hobby? Answer : Yes, but only the maps themselves would be as before; both I and the world had changed since 1985.

In 1985, the Charles Close Society was still very young, *Sheetlines* had reached issue 14, the big articles had started, but cartobibliographies and monographs were yet to appear. In the April issue, Tim Nicholson had given us a first list of tourist and district maps, but we only had map titles, with few illustrations. Few of us had ever heard of Deeside, Oban or the Middle Thames maps. My list of things to look for grew rapidly because information was spreading quickly via *Sheetlines* and Society meetings. We were all learning and friendship was an important part of collecting, the sociable giving and exchange of information.

Where did we look for maps? As now, everywhere, but mostly in secondhand bookshops, followed by book fairs, booksellers' catalogues and mapsellers' catalogues. People mention charity shops, but I have never found anything of interest in them. If you were lucky, bookshops were the key to finding maps. And they were cheap, which is why I can say that I bought almost everything I saw. I did not see much, those found were inexpensive, and frequently something was totally new. I can remember finding my first

Fifth Relief Edition under a stall near Petticoat Lane one Sunday morning in 1974, and on returning home was unable to learn anything about it.¹ An unknown series, but why a red cover border, whilst other maps with a modern hiker had blue borders? I obviously did not look too closely at the wording, nor the map inside. An Arthur Palmer Peak District appeared in a secondhand furniture shop. One looked everywhere.

Bookshops were certainly my main source of maps before 1985. Shops one kept returning to because they once yielded something good, and never did again. Shops where, on enquiring, the owner always told the same story, year after year, of the large box of OS maps that came in a few months ago and sold at once. One always felt the need to enquire, just in case. And then one would try to get the owner to promise to let you know if anything came in, and sometimes they might even take your telephone number. I never received a call. One lived in permanent hope of arriving just after a big collection had been purchased. The only person I can think of who was this lucky was a good friend who dug out a *Forth Clyde and Tay*, as we called it then, amongst other things. Amongst other things. Dream on.

I never went to book fairs before 1980 because I did not know of them. Such ignorance. Had I known, I would certainly have gone, as one would have seen and learned so much. Many members indulged in the Saturday tour, especially if it included a fair. A trip around bookshops, antique arcades, junk shops and anywhere else that might yield the goods. Such collectors are fuelled by a vast reserve of hope and need a thick skin against the disappointment of endless searching with only limited success. If one stayed at home, there was always the printed word. Several CCS members issued catalogues of OS maps, causing palpitations when the post arrived. There was always enough to keep you quiet for a good while, marking, checking, checking again, adding up, hoping, telephoning odds and ends were found in general booksellers' catalogues, but today the golden days of catalogues have long gone. Certainly the golden catalogues; all catalogues.

On Thursdays I might have bought the *Exchange and Mart*, a wonderful publication. At the end of primary school it told us of a shop in Shepherd's Bush market selling terrapins, in our teens it directed us to record and scooter shops in Brixton, and in my mid-twenties it offered OS maps, 13 Civil Air Edition maps caused a thrill. Wonderful items were sometimes listed, including, Brian Bechter tells me, the magnificent Mudge map that the OS displayed at the 2014 AGM map market : "Large Mudge of Kent" with a phone number, £20 cash paid.

The changes since about 1985 are pretty obvious : our society and its publications have flourished, *Map cover art* exists, there are fewer bookshops and booksellers, fewer mapsellers, map prices have increased and the Internet is everywhere. Anyone starting to take an interest in OS maps can quickly read enough to become far more knowledgeable than an experienced collector of 1985. Even without the decline in bookshop numbers, the gradual rise in petrol prices and city centre parking charges would have devastated the Saturday tour. Using the Internet's convenience and vastness, one can now search for maps

¹ There was only one reference work available : JB Harley and CW Phillips, *The historian's guide to Ordnance Survey maps*, 1964, which does not mention the Fifth Relief Edition. Pre-war *Descriptions* were not known to me.

worldwide, from home, office or on the train, whenever one wishes. Sadly, amongst collectors today, all one hears mentioned is eBay, and it would be Canute like to suggest that bookshops, book fairs and junk shops are a truly comparable alternative. The auction site allows collectors to see many more maps than previously, with a greater chance of finding, and for those with deep pockets, buying scarce items. Traditional economics predicts that if scarce items appear more often, supply and demand dictates that prices fall; eBay has obviously not read the text books, and fantastic prices are paid for the really scarce items, although prices can be startlingly low for standard series maps.

So, in these changed conditions do I want to re-gain a hobby and start collecting maps again? The world has changed, so have I, but the maps remain the same. Yes, I would like to try, but only on my terms. Given the prominence of eBay, I am not prepared to spend hours sitting alone in front of a sterile computer screen; this must be kept to a minimum. I want collecting to be sociable, taking me out and about, talking to people, getting a feel of what is going on in the reduced real world of secondhand books and maps. One has to be out to stumble upon maps in unexpected locations, the only source of OS maps to have remained largely intact. I want to visit bookshops, where one is easily distracted from the map quest. Indeed one wishes to be distracted, it is all part of the leisure activity. Relaxing, a word one cannot honestly use for searching eBay.

Of course eBay will come into it, but with rules. I will not bid on anything with an inflated postage charge, nor for an OS map described as rare, retro, collectable, vintage or antique. The words nose and spite come to mind. Above all, I intend that eBay will not be the only source of maps, nor the main source, and will try to plough other furrows as much as I can. I cannot see how one can get satisfaction from a predominantly eBay collection, where one never touches a map until it arrives, never stands and opens a map for consideration, having the pleasure of re-folding a poorly folded map, or of flicking through ordered rows of maps at a fair, indeed, one does not even bend over a box of tatty specimens in a bookshop. "Get up to date" someone shouts from the back, "Do it at work whilst the boss pays you".

Ah, but what about the chase? True, one can still have the thrills of the chase with eBay, as it is so vast and human error is so prevalent. Many things are missed by the crowd due to poor spelling or miserable descriptions that are wrong or lacking in detail. An early bird spots a 'Buy it now' item and others are none the wiser.

Bookshops might be closing, but a lot of the closures result in the stock being put onto the Internet, and thankfully, many booksellers maintain their same attitude to selling, shunning auctions, preferring to name a price and letting the buyer find the item. Maps are frequently listed on bookselling sites. But one has to read carefully. An entry : 'Ordnance Survey six-inch map of London, 1921, Sheet H, covers slightly scuffed, otherwise nice condition, £10', did not mention the moody Ellis Martin illustration of the Thames Embankment, but Sheet H was a giveaway.

So, mostly for the pleasure of the chase, I will give it a go. And having decided, what am I looking forward to? As of old, making endless lists, lists of what I would like to find, lists of what might exist, lists of where to look, lists of who to contact. Friends are weeding collections, maybe I can be cheeky and ask whether they have anything I might want. A day

out, strengthening an old friendship, see their collection again, map chat. Sounds too good to be true. Henceforth, it will be a real pleasure to look through even a handful of tatty maps with no pressure attached. I will look for myself, not for stock. It will not matter if I see some nice bright Third Editions at a price higher than would allow me to take them into stock, nor will I have to scan Seventh Series or Pops, looking for ‘good numbers’ to buy. As far as maps go, I intend joining the ‘me’ generation.

Writing things down often helps to clarify thoughts, and the above shows me that my greatest pleasure has always been in looking for maps, thinking where they might lurk and winking them out. What maps they turn out to be is mostly irrelevant. All a bit like work really, the constant hunt for new stock. Maybe I never lost a hobby, and that the hobby was always the search for maps, with a business within a hobby as a sideline.

PS. The above was finished in January 2015, and having tried it, I do not think it will work. My gaps are few, the maps required so specific and the rate that any appear, so slow. I am not going to spend the rest of my days sitting around waiting, having been spoiled by the quantity and rate of map acquisition as a mapseller.

PPS. Alas, or hooray, according to your nature, this is my last offering of Kerry Musings. Seventy times I have tried the patience of members, and maybe now is the time to stop. I have always been pleased when my scribbles bring in brief comments or longer pieces to *Sheetlines*, and am grateful for the many kind comments received over the years.

The three editors, Chris Higley, John Davies and Andrew Darling have been very kind in letting me go my own way. My initial intention was to write pieces commenting on Ordnance Survey matters, and to insert small observations and information that would be difficult to work up into an article, even of half a page.

So, thank you all for reading them. With the first musing, Chris Higley suggested that they might become regular; with this one, they might become irregular. Might.²

Editor’s Footnote: David and I have been pondering possibilities for a replacement series with which to close forthcoming editions of *Sheetlines*; perhaps on a theme of ‘Map moments’ or similar, with short pieces of a light and hopefully amusing nature. The idea is attractive in principle, and readers with ‘moments’ (or any other suitable topics or, indeed, musings) to share are invited to submit potential candidates for consideration.

² So ends Kerry Musings, which, even if contrived, end as a small footnote in history.