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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

Over the years, I have twice been told of thousands of large scale plans, in dozens of plan chests, that had to be removed from somewhere, as of yesterday. One location was rural and the other under a London main line railway terminus. Lacking the necessary storage space, I did not take part and am not sure of the outcome, except that I never heard of the market being flooded with the plans. But, of plans being flooded I do have experience. We were flooded in July 2012, seventeen inches in the hall and map store and ten throughout the rest of the house. A lot of County Series 1:2500 plans were damaged beyond re-cycling and had to go into a skip, along with folded maps in the lowest drawers of sixteen filing cabinets, three drawers of Old Series, engraved six-inch full sheets and much more. There is no need to dwell on this whilst making the point that it was not how I had intended the parting to be. Just as a few weeks earlier, we had to leave our store in Welshpool, and could not bring everything back to the house. So at short notice I had to sort through several thousand 1:2500 sheets, keeping only those that 'had anything on them' : towns, large villages, industrial archaeology and so on. The rest went for re-cycling; several car loads each day, hundreds of sheets, showing just fields and forestry, which nobody would want to buy. Even local history libraries declined them as a gift. Today, there is nobody available in local government to go through a pile or list to select what is needed. Save money, no money, accept gaps and get a photocopy if the petty cash allows.

When it comes to our own cherished map collections, none of us would wish such a disorderly retreat. So often we hear older people saying that they are sorting things out and disposing of items, as it will save someone else having to do it later. Over the years, I have bought collections where no instructions have been left to executors, just as a few times, an executor has found a note saying to contact me. In the latter cases, the wishes of the deceased are granted, and a burden is removed from the family. So, briefly, what sort of things should one consider when thinking about the future?

The most desirable outcome is that a map collection is 'disposed of' as the owner wishes. Preferably by themselves, or under their instruction. The best time to call it a day is when a collector is both physically and mentally capable, in control and making all the decisions: pleasing friends, enriching public collections, or just selling in bulk to map-sellers or at auction. The same can be achieved by leaving detailed written instructions, but the derived pleasure and satisfaction are nil. "I don't want someone else to have to sort things out." The key words here are 'sort things out'. If someone else has to see to things, work will always be needed, a lot of work usually, which can be lessened if clear instructions are left. Instructions introducing the collection, highlighting important items and advice on how to proceed. Even better if preparations have been made in advance, and someone has visited and seen the material. So often instructions are lacking. Things are not discussed with executors or relatives, leaving them to

identify and handle the unfamiliar, frequently not being able to execute the wishes of the collector. At the very least, a short tour and description of the collection in advance would help, noting special and common items.

When does one decide to stop collecting? Never, is the real answer. Or at least, one never ceases to look. We have not been buying stock for years, yet if someone rings offering maps, I cannot resist asking for an outline of what is available, which is the same as a retired collector looking in the bookshop map box. One always does. Perhaps a good indication of when it might be easier to call it a day, is when one consigns sections of a collection to boxes in the garage or attic. Let's face it, the owner will almost certainly never look at them again. So why not part with them now, and have the satisfaction of knowing they have gone to a good home one approves of? Having taken the decision, the path ahead varies from person to person. Some identify maps they would never part with and work on the remainder. Others start with maps they can more easily part with, and head for the garage.

It is all very well saying things are to be disposed of, and deciding what is to go, but the actual disposal could be the hardest part. Where does one start? Gift or sell? Gifting maps is not always easy. True, we all have friends that covet something we own, just as we covet something they treasure, and in this case, one should be sensitive to the desire of others. But for the straightforward, meaning common maps, it can be tricky, as I believe there is a tremendous overlap in holdings of most collectors. If you offer your friends a choice of any of your post-war maps, they will probably have 98% of what they want or 'need', and you also will be lacking their missing 2%. In a similar way, the large public collections will probably not want anything of this sort, and even if you spent ages listing what is available, as mentioned, many will not have the resources to check the list. Remember, without prior contact and agreement, a bequest might well be refused.

I cannot immediately bring to mind a private collection, the whole of which merits keeping intact, as so many collectors are easily distracted, having a core collection and a mass of other material. But whole sections of many private collections really should be preserved for the future, preferably within a public collection, so that we, and future generations can enjoy them. Those who own such, know their importance, have a good idea of where they should be housed, and will probably have the best chance of agreeing a deposit or sale.

So, let us consider a group of Ordnance Survey produced aviation maps, civil and RAF, all scales, held as sets, plus print code variants, together with proof copies of maps and covers, ephemera, a large file of personal notes and copies of official documentation. Five hundred maps; mouth-watering. Where might these find a public home, whether given free or sold? I would doubt whether one would have to make more than a single telephone call, but almost certainly the initial reply would be that the matter would have to be considered. What might the considerations be?

A library would initially consider whether it was within their remit, their sort of thing? A public library would be negative, the RAF Museum would just happen

to be passing tomorrow and a legal deposit library would seek more information. Even though the last two institutions might have a considerable number of the maps offered, a researcher would find that holdings are scattered and only appear together in a catalogue, if then. So, such a collection would save a lot of work for both sides if a popular subject, even without the attractive supporting material. A favourable response would be likely if collections on similar subjects were held, or if that offered was a new area, which added strength, depth or breadth to the existing collections.

If interest is shown, the next step might be to assess the material offered: do similar collections exist elsewhere, how complete is it, how important do those who know about such things judge it? What will the likely usage be? If the staff cannot provide answers, enquiries will be made. A final decision will be made after considering the costs of acceptance. What storage space, storage containers, conservation and cataloguing effort are needed? I have been told by one map curator that such a collection, especially if gifted, would be more likely to be accepted if accompanied by a bequest to help allay the outgoings involved. Perhaps it would be within the charitable status of our society to help financially in certain cases, especially where failure to do so would see an important collection being broken up.

I cannot remember a discussion of positive support by the society for any particular map collection, other than our archives, which are not map orientated as such. Should there be? The regional distribution of the legal deposit libraries in England is appalling, with all three being in the greater south east. Might we wish to help build a strong Ordnance Survey collection of national standing between Birmingham and Edinburgh? I am strongly in favour of keeping things local. Local maps in local libraries, meaning that I would have distributed the Ordnance Survey Record Map Library's 1:500 town plans around the British Isles, rather than keeping them together. They would have been of more use, and therefore more used and valued if housed in the towns they depict. I have never heard of a national policy seeking to 'house' maps in their locality. Years ago, a scarce map of the turnpike roads in Mid-Wales was offered in a map-seller's catalogue. The British Library just beat the National Library of Wales in buying it, and I have had to go to London twice in order to study a map of my own area. Surely there could be a mechanism to remedy this, either by exchange of items or funds, thus strengthening regional diversity. Again, should the society try to ensure that important Ordnance Survey maps are held locally wherever possible?

Compared to when the society was founded, there are more private collections, and within them many scarce and unusual maps, known to be so, rather than just being another seemingly ordinary map. Having gathered these, we must not let them be thrown back into the pond and vanish. As ever, I ask that at the very least, scarce maps are recorded, if not made available for consultation. Surely we all have an obligation to others and the society to repay something for the knowledge and support received? Placement of part of a collection in a public institution is one option for only a few members; other options of more widespread relevance will be considered at a later date.