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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***

A few issues ago, when I told of my fondness for plan chests, I did not mention that these were never my first love amongst office furniture. Long before I bought my first plan chest, I was hooked on filing cabinets. And still am, seeing no need to kick the habit. As so often happens, it started in a small way, very innocently really. In the second half of the sixties, Saturday mornings would see my mate Jim and me head up to the clothes shops in Shaftesbury Avenue and Wardour Street, *Take Six* and the rest. But whilst there, we would be lured into a very well stocked Ryman's in Soho. Yes, you can imagine the outcome. An assistant would sidle up and tempt us with wonderful displays of pencils, pens, notepads and other small things, which, in our innocence, we started buying, soon to progress to A4 folders and box files for 'A' level notes. Filing cabinets were the logical progression, but there was no room at home for such, and anyway serious money was needed for records (vinyl as they are now referred to).

As with plan chests, acquisitions only arrived in bulk after we started selling maps (though I did have a couple before then). In many ways, filing cabinets are to folded maps, what plan chests are to flat sheets. Initially, I bought a good supply of strong plastic Curver boxes, which sit on top of each other with no gaps, helping to keep the dust out. And then we took to English apple boxes with the top flaps cut off, which were just as strong, and free from the greengrocer. However, it was only when we converted the car port to a map store, that we hit the filing cabinets in a big way, and now have 19 in there.

Why cabinets rather than boxes? Boxes sit on each other, get heavier as one gets older, and requests are always for something in the lowest box. Lots of humping boxes about. The only real advantage of keeping maps in boxes, is that they can be moved fairly easily. Across a room, or to take them to the Charles Close Society AGM. If one becomes a convert to filing cabinets, such flexibility can be had by retaining a few boxes. A filing cabinet needs the same floor area as a pile of boxes, plus the space in front, whereas the boxes need an additional space to one side to decant a pile on to. And anyway, nothing in a map room can compare to opening a filing cabinet drawer, heavy with folded maps.<sup>1</sup> The smoothness of the runners, the feel of the action and the unmistakable swishing sound of the mechanism as a drawer opens or closes; reminiscent of a Victoria Line train appearing from a tunnel, except for the clunk at the end.

Filing cabinets are not so classy as plan chests, but are far easier to accommodate, and probably easier to use. Just pull the drawer handle, the contents can be seen at once and are immediately accessible. Open a drawer containing one-inch Seventh Series maps, and one looks down on the information needed to select that which is required. Sheet numbers, names and cover styles. Early short covers stand out, or rather shrink down, from later longer covers, whilst earlier thick cloth backed examples are distinct from paper maps in

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<sup>1</sup> Well, metal plan chests are probably comparable.

red laminated covers. Having selected a map, one just lifts it out. Replacing it is equally easy compared to flat sheets in a plan chest. If one is looking for several maps, those taken out can sit on the other maps in the drawer whilst one works, allowing the tops of the cabinets to be used for other purposes. And a heavy weight on top will not stop the drawers opening. Though I cannot speak for chipboard filing cabinets.

There are not many disadvantages to using filing cabinets for map storage. Flimsy folded maps lacking card covers, most 1:25,000 First Series and Second Series Pathfinders for example, tend to slip down and vanish unless really crammed into a drawer, which makes them increasingly difficult to handle. There is also the temptation to have three rows running the length of the drawer, which for post-war maps risks damaging them whilst taking them out. And if a run of maps is stored across the width of a drawer, from left to right, flimsy examples also tend to lean over and catch the cabinet sides when a drawer is opened and closed. Although filing cabinets can easily take three rows of pre-war maps, there is often a trough down the centre of the drawer and damage can occur if shunting maps. In such cases, I line the drawer bottom with cardboard. Drawers also benefit from a cardboard divider between the rows of maps. I always have dividers in whatever I use. In boxes, this means that if one is carrying them at an angle and the maps slide about, they will not hit each other and damage.

Overall, filing cabinets fulfil all the requirements of storing maps, where they are away from direct sunlight, away from dust, and the metal casing gives some protection from damp and excessive heat. Indeed, a metal drawer front is quite an advantage, in that fridge magnets can be used to hold notes and labels, rather than sticky labels that are difficult to remove after use. All drawers have a label holder, enabling clear identification of the contents, which is usually restricted to the map series. In some households, an unacknowledged benefit lies in the very fact that the contents are out of sight, so that a sudden influx of maps, does not arouse comment, and I have been told that other contraband can be hidden at the back of a drawer quite easily.

But, someone will ask, 'How can you afford to spend so much money on 19 filing cabinets? Look in any office furniture catalogue, and the prices are horrendous. There must be money in map-selling'. To which I would reply 'I did not. True. Nugatory'. No, the key to success is to have a source of supply, and be adaptable. My source was the man in charge of the local recycling centre, where 'useful' items are saved, and then sold at the gate to raise funds for a school charity. Every time a filing cabinet came in, he would ring me and I would pop down, paying £10 for a nice four drawer cabinet, which is easy to get home. But as I mentioned, one has to be adaptable, and not be fussy about a few scratches, dents or colours.<sup>2</sup> And if you buy a 'master key', even locked cabinets are no problem.<sup>3</sup> A CCS member must always be ready for the unexpected.

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<sup>2</sup> Although most are grey, I do have a green one, which of course houses half-inch maps.

<sup>3</sup> Twice, I have been to an auction and seen filing cabinets with keys in, only to find them later locked with no key in sight. Prices then plummet.

On getting a cabinet home, the first thing is to remove any hanging files, and to wipe the whole thing over to remove any grease or spilt coffee stains that might damage the maps. Most cabinets have small holes in the sides to bolt them to each other for safety reasons, but I have never seen these used, nor considered using them. There are a vast number of designs, but they are all fairly consistent in size, although the weight varies, in the same way that the metal in cars gets lighter all the time. The next thing is to decide which map series is to go into a cabinet and to cut lengths of cardboard for the drawers to separate the rows of maps. As mentioned, I consider this essential, even with plenty of space between rows, as one can then work quickly and need not worry about maps getting caught up with each other. At last, one can then introduce maps to their new home. As opposed to plan chests, which one just seems to fill up, it is easier to plan for expansion with folded maps in filing cabinets, where gaps can be left if more maps are anticipated, though a gap between cabinets, wide enough for another would be more useful than gaps in each drawer. Maintenance is minimal, a little grease on the runners, and a light wipe over with furniture polish prevents rust.

Now, I am tempted to say forget all that I have written, as there exists something far better than filing cabinets. Even better than filing cabinets are pattern cabinets. Pattern cabinets as found in haberdashers or whatever the shops are called that sell lengths of material for making into dresses, and sell the paper patterns to make them from. These patterns are kept in wonderful cabinets similar to office filing cabinets. They look like a shorter and wider filing cabinet, but each drawer has three metal dividers, giving four rows, into which even Seventh Series maps will fit with ease. But for pre-war maps, they really are excellent, and a cabinet will take 1300 maps comfortably. Alas, I only have one, which was bought at a local auction about twenty-five years ago. I telephoned and wrote to the pattern company, asking whether it was possible to buy more, even old battered examples, but got nowhere. If you are passing a material shop, pop in, have a look, and ask whether they have any for sale.

Of course, a lot of members keep their folded maps on shelves, as most normal people keep books. This is certainly the most visually satisfying storage method, and, depending on the height of the shelves, the easiest way to retrieve a map. But I defy anyone to say that maps stored on shelves do not attract dust or the spines fade, or that they regularly dust or vacuum them. Given a completely free hand, I would keep a collection of folded maps on shelves, but protected by slightly tinted glass doors. Which would release filing cabinets for other purposes, but not disposal.

Next week: Paper clips. Should we use coloured plastic or silver metal paper clips to keep the four quarter sheets of northern Old Series maps together? Two map librarians will debate the issue.