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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

We all love to receive a parcel, whether wrapped in brown paper, with knotted and slightly whiskery white string, or a plain box with any means of ingress hidden by wide brown plastic tape. Slit the tape, lift the flaps and behold: a box of maps. Nice work if you can get it, and for many years, for us, it was, and we did. Two or three small parcels or packets would arrive in the post each week, all bulging with maps. Not unusual maps, nor in bright, almost new condition; no, just good clean standard series maps: stock for our business. The Ordnance Survey has thrived on selling such maps, so why should we not? Scarce and rare OS maps were only ever a small side-line, mainly because by definition they seldom came our way, and secondly because one cannot make a living without selling lots and lots of standard maps.

I certainly derive a lot of pleasure from opening, looking into and decanting a box of maps. It was the initial opening that mattered, whether I had an idea of the contents or not. The exciting, all important first glance to judge whether the contents looked as imagined. As I had pictured them. The overall condition could usually be judged at once, making me either relaxed, knowing all was well, or anguished that something had gone wrong. This is totally different from looking down on an open box of maps in a bookshop, where a glance shows a pretty well-rooted bunch of sad rejects needing to be checked, just in case. Yes, a freshly-arrived parcel had prospects. Most of our stock of folded maps were bought via adverts, and arrived in small parcels. I usually had a good idea of what was in them and whether any gems might be present. Knowing the contents did not take the gloss off a new arrival, as I had asked for the maps to be sent and therefore probably wanted most of them. I was seldom disappointed, and at the very least would be merely satisfied.

One must allow plenty of time to open a box, it must not be rushed, even a box of Seventh Series or 1:50,000 maps. If the maps were in no particular order, then the enjoyment increased, like a jumble sale of old. As I took the maps out I sorted them into piles for each series, together with one for tourist maps, another for Bartholomews, and another for so obviously sad items. Barts maps would always be sent, even though I said I did not want them. Neither did the sender, and they correctly reasoned that I would not waste money by returning them. I never opened a map on the first forage, preferring to see the total of what had been sent. If there was something I really wanted to see, I would rummage until I found it, put it to one side, and then carefully go through the others, opening and checking every map against my notes and suggested prices scribbled in the telephone book.

On three levels, curiosity and hope are the two words that best describe how I felt when going through a box of maps. Firstly, I was curious as to exactly what was in the box, even though the contents had been described over the telephone. I was also hopeful for the appearance of something pleasantly unexpected. On the second level, I was curious how well the sender had answered my questions, and hopeful that they were accurate. Whilst on the third level, I wondered how good I was at asking the right questions, and making correct assumptions. Sometimes one was disappointed, sometimes unexpectedly pleased but usually just content, meaning that things were very much as imagined. By far the most upsetting thing was when a box

was opened and the smell of stale smoke knocked me to the floor. More upsetting than finding the maps had been annotated; a fact not mentioned by the seller. I would say that in ninety per cent of cases, when I mentioned the annotations to the seller, they said they had not actually opened the maps before contacting me.

As I say, most of the maps bought over the last thirty years arrived by post, in small packets and small parcels. True, we did buy large lots, but the majority came in parcels 14" by 10" by 8" or smaller, purchased from the good old general public as a result of advertisements in magazines. We inhabited the classified sections, and were constantly looking for new places to advertise. Many places were tried, but they had to have a large circulation and cheap lineage, less than £10 per insertion, because most adverts would only bring in one or two replies. But it worked, and people wrote or telephoned saying they had maps for sale.

Flat maps, rolled and arriving in cardboard tubes do nothing for me. All right, I prefer flat sheets to maps folded and cased (as the Ordnance Survey used to put it), but as a way of getting me excited by the arrival of the post, sending them in a tube is a waste of time. Take the end off, pull out any padding, gently twist the ends of the inner maps to relieve the tension and out they slide. To sit as a pile on the table with only the top sheet showing, or more likely to remain tightly rolled. Nothing visible, no excitement, even if the maps are deliriously wonderful or perhaps rare. Why, one hardly handles them. Flick through them, looking only at the very edges. So boring. Now, if the consignee had sacrilegiously folded each sheet, noted the details in pencil on the upper surface and sent the whole lot as a packet, things would be looking up. I would have the fun of opening each sheet to see what it looked like, and would work my way through the pile.

I always preferred to speak to anyone wishing to sell maps. One can get so much more from a conversation than the written word. By getting a feel for the person at the other end, one can also judge their ability to accurately describe what is in front of them. Not only describe, but also to assess the quality of what they are trying to sell. Such conversations could be quite tiring, as I was constantly trying to visualise the cover being described, deciding on desirability, digging for an idea of condition and jotting down notes of maps mentioned and sums to be offered. Most of the time I had to divert the seller from what they thought important, to what I needed to know. "The first map has a price of 2/6, and then there are five others with 3/-." A typical opening to a telephone call. Helpful? No. My go: "Do these have a man sitting on a hillside with a dark red border?" "Yes." "Are there any others like that?" "Let me see, ten in all." "What are the sheet numbers, and how would you describe the condition, well used, clean and sound, or nice and bright?" And so on. Having gone through the maps, I would then suggest an offer within a small price range, subject to seeing them. And most of the time, the maps would be packed and sent.

In the old days, when parcel post was cheap, very cheap, before the Post Office totally messed up their pricing structure and sent us all off to use carriers, the cost of postage was a handy tool in negotiations. If I was offered maps which I just could not decide about, but wanted to see, I would suggest that they were sent for inspection, and if a deal was not agreed, I would return them and refund the outward postage. If there was something I was desperate to have, or thought I might

offer more if I could view the maps and the seller was hesitating, I would again suggest that I would see they were not out of pocket if a sale failed to materialise.

Once it was agreed that the maps would be sent, I was always slightly on edge, more so if an exciting map was on its way. Auctions, where I rang for details and left a telephone bid were worrying as someone might have shuffled things between lots after I rang. Regardless of the sender, I was jittery. Would they be packed well enough? Would the best items fall out? Did the sender take my address down correctly, and such nightmares. Of course, if possible, at the end of a telephone conversation, I would always give advice on packing. A good strong box from the supermarket, not having been near soap powders, securely wrapped, and addressed clearly. I would even suggest the probable cost of postage in order to make things appear simple. Life was easy in those days, no problems of measuring the size of small, medium and large parcels. One could send as much in one parcel as could be lifted with a struggle, for what now seems a pittance. To help the Post Office personnel avoid a slipped disc, the receiving post office had to put a green cross all around an item to show it was super heavy. When at times I had to telephone and ask whether the maps had been sent or not, without exception, any delay was because a box could not be obtained.

After the post arrived, it would be wrong to picture a scene similar to the pirate kneeling before an open trunk overflowing with gold doubloons, "Mine, all mine". Alas, this never happened, though I have shared the smug smile of many collectors who find something particularly nice in an unexpected place. Ah, I can see you smiling again at the recollection. Finally, I would ring and confirm an offer, send off a cheque, and once enough packets and parcels had arrived, they were listed in a catalogue and the whole process started anew.

When I pack parcels or packets, things are slightly different, and necessarily so. Items ordered are listed on an invoice, making it easy to check all are present. Maps are listed in numerical order within series, but sometimes there is a sequence of larger or non-standard sized items. In the end, it all comes down to preparing a neat package that will travel without damage, whilst trying to make it easy for the recipient to check the contents. Here, I will hold up my hand and admit that sometimes when sending maps that a customer has not yet agreed to buy, I have been known to 'dress a parcel' as I call it, by putting the most interesting maps on top. A good impression can be obtained if the best items are seen first. What is the point in putting less interesting or lesser condition items on top of a pile? An initial sinking feeling needs something really wonderful to make up for it, whereas lesser items encountered later in an inspection seldom mar a favourable first impression. And the same holds true for when I open a box.

A while ago I was chatting to a bookseller whom I have known for about thirty years, and she mentioned that although she was now over eighty, she continued working, as she enjoyed it, so why not? Why not indeed? "I still get a thrill from looking in a box of books that has just been brought in" she said. I know the feeling.