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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***

I cannot help it, but I like plan chests. Any plan chest, wooden or metal, new or old, even the tacky ones made of laminated chipboard with dodgy drawer bottoms that sag within months. There was a time when I could not refuse to house one. I have nineteen full size chests, four of which will not open as so much weight sits on them, plus two four drawer examples, and one super-large one on wheels that is not assembled at present. Mostly, they are an indulgence, as they are not properly organised or the maps they hold are seldom requested. In our situation, such very long term storage could be better achieved in other ways. On balance, they are wonderful. I need say no more. My case rests. End of musing.

Before I started selling maps, I had a few flat sheets. Like everyone else, I kept them rolled, tucked in a corner and never looked at. I had not progressed to keeping them under the bed between two sheets of hardboard, covered in dust. When I bought my first flat sheets for stock, I knew that the correct thing to do was keep them in plan chests. One just did. So, when I had the chance of any, I bought them, and almost at once realised that they were not really what I needed, as a three foot high plan chest should only hold a sixteen inch wodge of maps. But I was hooked, and kept acquiring them. They are so satisfying. Eventually, even I had to admit that I had run out of space and acquisitions ceased. After Michael Bell died, I bought his six-inch quarter sheets, which he kept in thick-gauge polythene bags. These were a revelation. I bought more, in different sizes, and have been using them ever since. And have disposed of the plan chests? No, bags are even more useful when kept in plan chests.

Before you rush out and get one, you should decide what you want it for. The nicest that I remember was a small four drawer example, made of polished hard wood with brass corners and drawer handles. Sounds a bit corny, but it was a nice piece of furniture (always a good selling point if caught trying to smuggle one into the house), and crammed full of 1:2500 First Edition maps with the pink colouring, which made it desirable beyond belief. If not required as 'a nice piece', then is it wanted for long term storage of maps, or for those that you use fairly frequently? If the former, my advice is to forget it, as plan chests really do not hold very many maps. *Should* not hold many maps, is more accurate.

The great temptation is to keep adding maps to every drawer until defeat is acknowledged. Why? Because otherwise you will have an overfull plan chest and the inevitable map or two with no 'home', which you roll and tuck in a corner. 'What are these doing here? I thought you bought *that* thing for them.' Now is not the time to announce that measurements confirm another would fit on the landing.

For fairly frequent use I prefer a chest with ten shallow drawers, over one with eight deeper drawers. Why? Simply because you cannot get as many maps in each drawer. Perverse? Not really. Assuming the drawer is not overloaded (technical term), fewer maps mean that it is easier to pull any one out, with less risk of damage. Easier and quicker to replace after use. Try extracting a sheet with

a small marginal tear that catches on another sheet, the sound and *feel* of damage infliction is horrifying, regardless of rarity.

Fully loaded (another technical term) drawers do present the possibility of putting curled maps at the bottom so that the weight helps the flattening process. But this takes years to happen, if ever. My two metal chests have a metal rod across the front that holds any curled maps down and is an asset to look for. Drawers with too little in them also cause problems. Our drawers for engraved six-inch full sheets had lots of space on top and around the edges. No longer. Today, the drawers are stuffed with dissected six-inch maps in covers. Well, there was nowhere else to put them. Which are best, wooden or metal? On this, I will come out quite firmly and say 'Both'. My metal ones run so smoothly, open with the pull of a little finger and look nice. Wooden chests can vary enormously. I have a lot of ex-government examples, well built with framed drawer bottoms, and usually painted a dull colour, as you would expect. Only consider older ones of solid construction, which can take more weight and have protruding metal handles, which are easy to grip.

Having decided on the depth and number of drawers, and that you will be good and not overload them, the next question is what order to keep the maps in? The most used on top, or numerical order? I favour randomness. I find it easiest to consult a list of what should be in each drawer and then rummage. That way, things do not have to be replaced in order and the most frequently used stay on top. Sod's law states that any map will soon be needed again if put away properly. Less used items drift downwards over time and eventually fall over the back; cartographic composting. Another question: should maps be stored with the top or bottom margin nearest the user's tummy? I prefer the bottom margin, as it has the most information, including the all important survey dates which are lacking from the top. Pretty soon, no matter what size chest you have, you will get a map that is too large and will have to decide whether to fold it or store it in a tube and have it forever curled when taken out. I do not like folding maps, yet different sized maps in a sequence can be a problem. Anyone who has had to check the completeness of an Ordnance Survey Bi-Centenary set of one-inch Seventh Series knows that the checker's heart jumps four times as sheets are found to be missing from the sequence, followed by the joy of finding four oversized sheets beneath sheet 190. The ideal I suppose, is one map per drawer. Totally impractical of course.

We have never been able to have all our plan chests in one location. Had this been possible, I would have had to decide on how to arrange the blessed things. Side by side, back to back or one on top of the other? In 1987-88, I visited the Geography Department of Glasgow University and saw two displays that have remained with me. The first was stunning. A bank of modern, shallow drawer metal chests that stretched along a whole wall and reached well above head height. Very impressive. A magnificent sight. The second was a stairwell in the old building with a stack of ancient wooden chests piled one above the other. I would hate to suggest how many there were on top of each other, but my memory is that there were a lot, and one had to lean over the banister to pull a drawer open. Whilst all arrangements have their merits, there is nothing to beat removing a map from a drawer and sliding it on top of the plan chest for viewing. This is both practical and efficient. The golden rule is to keep the surface and space in front clear at all times, just like ours

are, ho-ho. 'Is there a plan chest under that lot?' I quite like one and a half, but once you go two or more high, problems start, especially with deep drawers which hold a lot of maps. How do you get up to look in the drawers, and then safely remove the lowest item? Stack plan chests two high and the top will quickly be used for storage, with the risk of too much weight causing the top couple of drawers to stick shut. Putting something on top, 'Just for now' always equals permanency.

So, having found a chest and agreed a safe passage to your map room, to get it home you will need a piece of white chalk, which seems to be the industry norm, a screwdriver and an old Renault 5. A standard eight drawer wooden chest consists of two identical boxes, one with a top, sitting on another without a top. Sometimes there is a plinth. Open each drawer and number them one to eight, ignoring the different figures in each drawer from previous moves. Remove the fourth drawer down and take out a couple of screws that hold the two carcasses together. The easiest thing is then to replace the drawer, slide the top box away from the lower one, and move the two boxes as they are. If two of you cannot lift them, remove the drawers, which are very light and the carcasses will be found to be equally light. We used to be able to get one box, with drawers, into a 1990s style Renault 5. Reassembling is simple, but you must position the base correctly. You cannot nudge a full plan chest even an inch to the left or right, especially on a carpet. The whole thing has to be dismantled.

But what about my enthusiasm for polythene bags you ask? Well, we buy our bags from the people who supply the Queen, and jolly handy they are too. On the same floor area that a three foot high plan chest can hold 16 inches of maps, bags can hold 36 inches or more. All bags are labelled and loaded to a comfortable weight, so we work down the pile until we find the bag we need. The contents are kept clean, free from dust and sunlight, and are not damaged by being humped around. Certainly worth considering for long term storage. To remove a map, just pull the bag contents half out, extract the map and slide the rest back. This ability to slide also works wonders with the bags themselves if used in plan chests. Rather than having 160 maps in a drawer, one can have four bags, each with forty maps. To replace a bag, just slide it into the correct place, something that cannot be done with individual maps, unless they are very near the top of a pile.

With a plan chest, one cannot glance at the contents as with the spines of folded maps, and herein lies their allure, a cartographic yashmak. On a library visit, who has not dropped behind and just slid open a drawer, any drawer? All plan chests are full of wonderful things. When the society visited the Bodleian library in September 1991 and were taken 'out the back', whilst Betty Fathers was describing the wonders of the collection, she casually pulled open a drawer, seemingly at random, and there was the Laxton map.<sup>1</sup> Let's face it, plan chests are where the really interesting maps are kept. Surely this is what it is all about?

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<sup>1</sup> *A plat and description of the whole mannor & Lordship of Laxton ... 1635*. An Estate plan showing strip farming landscape, as Nigel James kindly reminded me.