

*Kerry musings**David Archer*

I hesitate to mention the word fractal with so many members well versed in the numerical sciences, but any collection of Ordnance Survey maps should bring it to mind. A fractal, where the same pattern repeats over and over, or, for OS maps, nearly the same pattern is repeated with different sized collections. The map market after our Annual General Meeting displays a pattern, repeated over and over, on a smaller and smaller scale. The stalls composing the whole event contain a wealth of fairly standard and easily found maps, with some less common examples. A single stall will similarly be home to mostly standard maps, with a few unusual items; a pattern repeated in a single box on any stall, where, within a box, a group of maps from the same series will be mostly common numbers with the odd scarce map. Got the idea?

Any group of OS maps exhibits this pattern, a few scarce items amongst the many. A small quantity of maps formed our first sales catalogue, yet in Catalogue 54, which was much bigger, the proportions were very similar, lots of Seventh Series and Populars with fewer Thirds and so on. Lots of easily found sheets with a few scarce sheets. This holds true for the whole Ordnance Survey output since 1801, for a copyright library, for your collection, or for the box in the bookshop (with luck). It also holds true for the handful of truly superb private collections, where everyone has the really rare items, considered common in this context, but each has a few maps unique to any collection. Thus, a basic pattern is repeated, whatever the scale. Subconsciously, we all know this and take it into account when deciding on a strategy for inspecting a collection of maps, where we try to weed out the few from the many. Consider the aforementioned map market at the AGM. 'The doors will open in one minute' Rodney tells the stallholders, and in sixty seconds the first members drift in. It never fails to amaze me just how slow the trickle through the door can be. Is it a reluctance to finish map conversations, or fear of the enormity of the task ahead? Collectors with a map hunting strategy? Not at first sight. And then they spread out and start looking. Spot the strategy.

Me and my sort. I like to get a feel for the totality that is on offer, and hopefully find anything really obvious before others do. I move around the whole venue very quickly, glancing at each table, looking for anything displayed prominently and peeping into the odd box or two. Then, if I can remember them, I return to the most promising stalls in descending order of promise. Standing in front of each stall, I repeat the process. I speedily scan the whole stall and then glance through each box, inspecting a map or two before I return to the most promising box. Here, yes, you've guessed, I skip through the box. Quickly, and then on to the next stall. I only focus on the visually obvious and miss a tremendous amount. I rely on things being easily seen, on stallholders recognising unusual items and having them displayed prominently. My approach acknowledges the power of distinctive covers or packaging in aiding identification. A lot of luck is needed, and an acceptance that during the

afternoon I will be shown and envy treasures that others have found using a more reliable strategy. I never find those unusual gems that can only be found by opening a map, as doing so slows you down terribly. Mine is no way to operate if looking for specific print codes, for example. But then, I am never looking for anything specific, just things that stand out. Literally, whatever catches my eye. Any map that hides a scarce print code deep within its folds is of no interest as I do not really collect maps. I just accumulate things I like. And having whizzed round a couple of times, I give up. Nobody has ever caught me ploughing through box after box as I do at record fairs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who have a vast collection and are looking for anything they do not have. And do not know they are looking for it until they see it. They have built large collections, lacking only a handful of obvious maps, whilst containing a tremendous number of unusual and interesting morsels. Such people accept that the goodies are there for the finding and systematically go through every stall, skipping only the sections that really do not interest them. These diligent souls find some very nice material, even quite late in the day. At the end of the afternoon they appear, seemingly shattered by the concentration needed, but clutching a handful of five or six nondescript maps 'which are of interest'. Found by hard slog, guided only by memory. It has to be done this way, there is no alternative. A variant on the systematic searcher are those looking to complete a map series, whatever that means, if such were possible. These collectors all have wants lists, and go from stall to stall, seeking only their pet series, hoping to find items marked as lacking in their lists. Such searchers always appear to be the most unhurried people in the world, oblivious to the squeals of delight as others find something nice. The only thing that might shift them is the presence of another collector checking a wants list through the same series. Having paid for any purchases, they gleefully amend their lists to prevent buying the same map later in the day. At the 2012 AGM, David Frankland had his now much reduced list down to a fine art, clearly set out on a stiff piece of card hung around his neck, with both hands free and no need to flick between pages of a book or unfold a torn and creased piece of paper.

A third group of members are merely 'interested in maps' and are not looking for anything in particular, just something that takes their fancy. (A bit like me, but read on.) They follow the middle way. Totally relaxed, they wander around the room all afternoon looking to be entertained. The word haste is not in their vocabulary. A map is picked up from a stall, opened wide and spread across the boxes before unwilling neighbours are invited to discuss the discovery, which is eventually replaced, mis-folded and mis-filed. "Very interesting", and they drift off, allowing the irritated neighbours to dive into the previously obscured boxes. Chris Board frequently arrives at our stall late in the day after others have gone and seemingly just chats. But all the while his eyes roam across the boxes, seeing only the top edges of maps. Year after year, with minimal handling he pulls out something interesting that the hordes have missed. Effortless. An art in itself. But no matter how you approach the search, it all comes down to luck in the end. Maps are found or missed by deviating from the normal, such as going round the

room in an anti-clockwise direction this time. A collector desperate for a given map misses it because someone has dumped it in the wrong box.

And then there is the problem of what to do when you find a map that looks promising. Do you waste time, and study it? Note its existence and location for future study and press on? Or do you start a pile of 'possibles' which moves across the stall with you? I can offer no explanation, but until recently, unless I was certain that I wanted a map, I would always put 'possibles' back in the boxes with the intention of going around the room a second time to look at them. Everyone has done this, and all have regretted it because the map is either forgotten or sold to someone else. I assume my thinking was that spending time on 'possibles' risked losing 'certains'. As you see, I am not very good at looking for maps. I just like to see what is available, and press on hurriedly.

So, the wise virgin builds a pile of 'possibles' and then sits on a seat beside the stall holder to consider what is wanted. A good or a bad thing to do? Holding on to things while you search a stock and then to put them back is unfair to other customers who might want the maps, and to the stall holder who might lose a sale to someone else. But having a pile allows you to speed through the stock without time-consuming checking. Opening folded maps slows things down. And if you do open a map whilst checking, you stop others from looking and are a real nuisance. Being polite and undertaking the check away from the stall means you lose your place. Better to add to the pile and press on, refiling unwanted items as quickly as possible. Seeing a pile build up allows the stall holder to ponder the likely total price and consider whether any discount is appropriate. It might also put pressure on the compiler, especially if a neighbour looks interested in something in the pile. Any stall holder will confirm that the easiest way to persuade a waverer to buy a map is to ask an interested neighbour whether they might want it. 'I found it first, and if he wants it, I really should buy it.' No, these days, I do like a pile to consider, and if some are thrown back, well, that's the way it goes. And having decided on my purchases, I like to have them put at the back of the stall to collect and pay for later, even though I sometimes find it hard to remember what I have and where. But oh, how frustrating to see wonderful things sitting on the floor waiting to be collected by others. In my book, the cardinal sin is to have things put aside and then say they are not wanted. Ban that person. One is honour bound to take a reserved map, even if another is found at a lower price elsewhere.

Tim Nicholson had a style of his own. At bookfairs, one could hear him go from pitch to pitch, 'Do you have any Ordnance Survey maps?', 'No?'. 'Thank you'. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. 'Do you have any Ordnance Survey maps?' It paid off handsomely. Attending all the major fairs, week after week, he was remembered, and people put things aside for the man who always asked for OS maps. And it saved time, especially with two fairs on the same afternoon. This approach was used at the AGM map markets, when Tim would appear and ask me whether I had anything of interest for him. If the stall holder knew what they had, looking through stock was obviously considered a waste of time.

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