“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

Having read an excellent article on how to spring clean a home computer, I decided that the same principle could apply to a collection of Ordnance Survey maps. Anything that is used, added to and stored for a long time will benefit from a spring clean of sorts, if not annually, then certainly every couple of years. And given the right approach it can be fun, and quite beneficial for the collection.

The first step is to clean the collection, as maps kept open to the air collect dust. Even in the most hospital-like home, maps on shelves or in open boxes will attract dust, so a light vacuum using the soft brush attachment is in order. Benderfold maps such as Seventh Series get dusty along the spines and way down between the maps, whilst closely packed maps will be dusty along the top edges. Don't forget the bit of shelf behind. Even if kept in sealed boxes under the bed or on top of a wardrobe, dust and the dreaded fluff must be dealt with. Small spiders seem to love dying amongst maps, but from observation, not large ones. If you keep flat sheets in wooden plan chests, pull each drawer out and vacuum down the sides of the maps to remove the very fine wood dust produced by drawers rubbing on the runners. A quick squirt of silicon is wonderful for obtaining smooth running drawers. Make sure that you have not slipped into bad habits storing your maps. Remember to keep them away from direct sunlight and high temperatures (radiators). Similarly, moisture and dust. No map has ever complained to me of being cold, but too long in a very dry or moist atmosphere causes no end of problems. Keep maps free of additives: old brittle rubber bands stick to covers whilst paper clips rust and leave marks on the maps, as do the staples on the glossaries in early Scottish folded maps.

Although not really part of a spring clean, you might want to brighten up dirty flat sheets which were not dealt with on receipt. I once tried a technique that I had often seen mentioned, involving sliced white bread, even the suggestion of which is known to give conservators nightmares. Buy a bag of really soft white bread, the sort that sticks to the top of your mouth when you have a sausage sandwich from a roadside snack bar. Mother's Pride was always considered the best. Remove the crusts from a couple of pieces and squeeze the middle into a ball. Methodically rub a very dusty flat sheet with the bread ball. The dark dust is removed, the paper sparkles and fine grey breadcrumbs are left to be swept off the map. I only ever tried it on a couple of sheets but it really did work, no doubt leaving a fine coating of organic matter to produce rampant foxing and other fungal growth in years to come. John Henry prefers to use a dead hamster to remove dust from his treasures. This is a small, rectangular bag filled with archival approved talc of some sort, which oozes out as the bag is rubbed over the map, leaving a trail of grey dust similar to bread crumbs. Hold one of these and you will appreciate where the name comes from.

I am frequently asked whether maps should be stored in boxes, drawers, or on open shelves. As long as they are away from direct sunlight, high temperatures, dust and moisture it really does not matter, in my opinion. In the average house, I would keep them on show and take pride in the hard work that has gone into putting the collection together. I cannot see any fun in keeping them stored away in boxes, as I do. A nice glass-fronted bookcase can really set them off and be a feature of any room. If they get a little dusty or bleached, why
worry? Live for the present. Most of our maps will be represented in other collections should they eventually disintegrate.

Having done a bit of housework, the next thing is to tidy the collection and make sure the maps are in order within each series. Over the course of a year some maps are bound to be replaced incorrectly. We have all spent hours searching for a particular map, only to find it in the wrong place, or that in the five years since it was last seen, its appearance has changed totally. Tidying is probably the most enjoyable part of the whole exercise as one re-discovers long forgotten items and re-lives the thrill of successful map hunts or bargains found long ago. Added to which, we all need to look at our maps periodically to familiarise ourselves with what we have, and prevent buying duplicates. So many collectors just keep adding new acquisitions to the maps on the shelf and never really appreciate what they have achieved. They never look at the whole collection, just each map as acquired. Spending a day playing with tidying your maps is even greater fun if you invite another collector to help. Whenever I feel that things are slowing down, nothing interesting is appearing and my enthusiasm is low, I have a good sprut (as they say around here when rummaging), and bingo, maps are great again.

When everything is clean, tidy, in order and you know exactly what you have, sit back and think about the collection, what you use it for, what you want to collect and the direction in which you would like to see it develop over the next couple of years. Having done this, go back and see if any items can be disposed of. Weed them, casting out individual maps or sections that do not fit in with how you see the collection developing. There is nothing wrong in deciding that you no longer want maps you paid good money for or were so excited to have found. Time passes and things change. None of us can resist a bargain or a curiosity, even if they do not fit in with our interests. These are prime candidates for weeding as it will make you feel ruthless to have wielded the pruning knife. As our interests change, some sections become dead wood, so get rid of them. Again, everyone would like more space for new arrivals, and possibly some cash or swaps from the weedings. The residue benefits by becoming more focused and relevant to your interests. Brownie points are always gained by reporting that maps have left the house.

The final task is to identify what your collection is lacking. Get your wants lists out and check that they are up to date. More importantly, make sure that you understand them. Anyone who has had a stall selling books or maps will have seen a true look of horror from a potential customer. I have seen two or maybe three. Standing behind your stall, as the public mill about in the hall, you suddenly become aware of someone moving slightly faster than the flow and ending up in front of you. Whilst fumbling in their pockets, they usually say something to the effect that they had not expected to see Ordnance Survey maps today. They pull out a well-worn, creased piece of paper with minute writing on it, and study it for a long time. Then they look you in the eye, look at the maps on the table, look at their list and return to you with that look in both eyes. The second time I witnessed this I said, "You don't know whether it's a list of what you've got or what you need, do you?" "No." One chats, but all the time they look at the maps on offer and imagine every one to be on their wants list. However, all ends well, as at the next event, they are the first through the door and bound up to you with a large piece of paper clearly marked 'Maps wanted'. 