

Kerry musings

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It grew rapidly, is big, popular, dominant, easy and inexpensive to use. It exists alongside what was there before, and has had a profound effect on the buying of old Ordnance Survey maps. Emerging from Echo Bay, and originally called AuctionWeb, everyone is aware of eBay, the internet auction.

Maybe we can consider a few of the changes that have resulted from the growth of eBay auctions.¹ First and most obviously, the size of the whole market has increased because eBay has not obliterated the traditional market which, if it has declined, has shrunk far less than eBay has grown. And eBay is big. Net result, a much larger market. Expansion has been rapid because it is so accessible and easy to participate in; anyone can buy or sell almost anything. There are numerous sellers, offering a vast number of OS maps to a very large number of buyers (well, hopeful bidders).

Anyone can now be a seller of maps. A couple of unwanted OS maps can be offered to the whole world in a few minutes, regardless of condition and lacking any knowledge of what is offered. Based on the assumption, fostered by charity shops and car boot sales, that everything has a re-sale value, there is also a lottery element, in that something might just be worth a fortune, so spending a few pence listing it seems sensible. At the same time, an increasing number of people look for OS maps on eBay. Collectors are able to look every day, not just Saturday or when catalogues arrive, and have been joined by casual purchasers, so that any map offered stands a greater chance of being seen by someone wanting it than if offered elsewhere. Buyers, as a group, spend more time looking for maps than previously, encouraged by a greater chance of finding choice items. Non-map people, local historians, for example, can search for anything on, say, Swansea and come up with books, mugs, ephemera, T-shirts or maps. Very few would previously have gone out looking for OS maps of the town, but a computer on one's desk makes eBay at lunchtime irresistible.

Secondly, for the first time, all buyers have easy access to all sellers and vice versa. Previously, there was a pretty good geographical spread across England and Wales of stocks of OS maps for sale. But not everyone knew of all the sources, certainly not of auctions, and the seller with a shop in Portsmouth had little access to a collector in Durham. Now, all buyers know of all maps that are listed, and a seller in Aberdeen has access to everybody wanting to buy, no matter where they live. The traditional market has a hidden sector where mapsellers sell many items, standard and scarce, without them appearing in their general stock; but on eBay, if a map is available, everyone knows of it, has a chance to buy it, and can witness the sale.

Thirdly, a new, and ever changing group of sellers has emerged, the majority

¹ I will only consider eBay auctions in this piece, ignoring maps offered at a set price. The words seller and buyer usually refer to groups of individuals, and the traditional market refers to mapsellers, bookshops, and everywhere else one finds maps.

having no interest in, or knowledge of what they are selling. This need not be a hindrance to either side, as long as good honest descriptions are given, and questions are answered competently. Fail to do this, and one's cherished 100% positive feedback is in jeopardy.² The wealth of mundane descriptions helps knowledgeable sellers, who can highlight the unusual, thus attracting interest with resulting high bids. However, a seller's ignorance of maps means that advice and guidance have vanished from the new market place, as have lasting personal contacts. Traditional mapsellers were, and are, happy to chat, advise and guide. They are knowledgeable and want customers to return, so try to build a relationship. They know a lot about their customers and can make introductions for those with similar interests. When all items listed are considered 'one-offs', continuity of any sort is lacking and buyers are very much on their own. Although eBay allows new collectors to see a wide range of maps and prices, it is no substitute for the map market at our AGM, where one can handle and compare maps and get advice, assuming members have not sold everything on eBay.

Fourthly, more maps are offered than could be handled by the traditional sector, even if they wanted them. Some even sell. No that's not fair. The maps offered on eBay are numerous, ever changing and frequently very repetitive in nature, but like any outlet, there are good standard series maps, scarce maps and occasionally others totally unknown until listed. My feeling is that more maps are bought on eBay than from any other single source, possibly all other sources combined. A lot of people are delighted with what arrives, others content and some very upset.

I would suggest that a greater number of scarce and previously unknown maps appear during any given period, than would be acquired by the traditional market. Why? Just the sheer volume of what is offered must produce such items. A scarce map amongst a handful found in a cupboard would previously have stood a good chance of being binned, but with eBay, they are so often listed. Well known but scarce maps are easily identified by the accompanying photograph, but buyers have to be exceedingly diligent in order to winkle out the true unidentified goodies. They must take a chance and rely on intuition, as a question asked and answered can be added to the map description for all to see.

Any previously unknown map listed on eBay will almost certainly be identified by buyers not sellers. And unless the new owner publicises the map in *Sheetlines*, it will remain unknown, assuming nobody else spotted it. Previously, mapsellers would spot the majority of new discoveries coming onto the market and would tell people about them. So, there might be more discoveries via eBay, but the map community does not hear of them. Our inability to rank many maps in order of scarceness increases if new discoveries are not notified. We cannot use eBay prices for this purpose, and assume the higher the price, the scarcer the item, because high prices are for desirable maps, which is not the same as scarce maps. A tourist map once sold for a ridiculous price, but investigation showed the

² A point made by Chris Bull, who kindly read and commented on this piece.

two top bidders were desirous local history collectors, with most people dropping out around a sensible figure.³

Fifthly, compared to the traditional market, buyers have a far better understanding of how the new market works, and can use this information to their advantage. eBay is very transparent, and with observation, buyers now know far more about all maps, common, less common and scarce; the frequency with which they appear, how many bidders they attract, what price the peloton bid and what the high bidders offer. They can see what others think a map is worth, and just as importantly, they see what fails to sell.

As a group, buyers know far more about the old OS maps offered on eBay than the sellers do. Buyers study the market on their computer screens and note what is going on. Very few sellers do, unless they also buy. This is the opposite of the traditional market, where mapsellers need to keep an eye on what happens elsewhere. Previously, collectors were not really interested in the whole market, only what they wanted. They found it hard to gather information; comparing prices was difficult, except in a very general way, relying on periodic inspections of mapsellers' stocks and catalogues. Unless they were the purchaser, they had no idea of what sold quickly or its price. Similarly, they had little idea of how long an item had been on display, or what sold well or poorly. But now, they can see what is happening, minute by minute, and they follow prices and what appears, using this information both on eBay and in the traditional market to assess what is on offer. No longer are buyers passive participants, but can now profit from their observations. For example, I wanted a limited issue American CD, which started to appear regularly. Initially the keen collectors paid £22-£24, but after about six months the price was below £10 and I bought a copy. Observing such price movements with ease are impossible elsewhere. Similarly, with so many maps appearing, many collectors have completed sets, so that good standard items often sell for low prices, if at all. A new collector can do well.

The final major change, as hinted above, is that on eBay, if an auction goes beyond an opening bid it is the buyer who determines how much is paid. Mapsellers no longer set the price.⁴ The only way a seller can influence the market is with the level of the starting bid and postal charges. Too high, and a sale is lost.

eBay does have some sort of price structure, but it is fragile and often broken. Many regularly offered maps, common and scarce, settle within a narrow price range after the really keen people have obtained copies. However, some people appear to have bursts of activity on eBay, and if these returning buyers together with new buyers get excited about an item the outcome will be unpredictable, bids above the range will result and price fluctuation occurs, prices flare, quickly falling back with subsequent listings of the map. But, I suggest, the greater the

³ But if a map regularly sells for £100, and the pack only ever goes to about £15, what is the price? What would you consider a fair offer for such a map if wanted for your collection?

⁴ eBay auctions use the terms 'Starting bid' and 'Winning bid', but I have used the word 'price' to mean the total amount paid for a map, including postage.

interval between copies of a map being offered, the greater the risk of price fluctuation, without a 'stable' price being established.

Antiques, books and stamps abound in the auction rooms as single items and dealers know the sort of prices the market puts on them, but in the past, it was almost unheard of for single OS maps to be auctioned, so mapsellers never really knew what sort of prices the really scarce maps could fetch. Such maps were usually sold away from the public gaze and prices were confidential. When known, some collectors were invariably heard to say 'I would have paid more'. Now, with equal access for all, they just bid to their limit, yielding markedly higher prices for scarcer maps.

I have heard people say that they use eBay to price maps, and when pressed it appears they have glanced across a few dozen unfinished auctions, and noted the unrealistic starting prices and silly descriptions put up by the ignorant to attract the gullible. Only completed auctions are meaningful, showing final prices, the number and spread of bids, and unsold items.

The above is full of generalisations, but as an intelligent reader, a Charles Close Society member, will forgive this and add the exceptions to certain statements. As with any market place, there are problems, pitfalls, bargains, rogues, kindness and dishonesty. I feel that eBay works well, except that a lot of people do not look anywhere else for maps. Is that bad, sad, or unfortunate?

Letters

Richard Dean writes: I was interested in Debbie Hall's account of the Unpopular Edition in *Sheetlines* 93. Although issued in monochrome it is clear from the extract that these unusual maps were produced by photozincography from fully coloured originals identical to the series which followed it. So would it be foolish to speculate which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Philippa J Corrie writes: I am enjoying *Maps from the past, half-inch sheet 37 Leicester*, particularly since it is my home area. I idly traced the course of the then new M1, in its difficult-to-follow red. Interestingly the projected spur near Watford Gap was unlabelled whilst the continuation to Birmingham was labelled 'M1'. I thought 'No it's not' and dug out Seventh Series sheets 131 and 133. I don't possess an appropriately-aged sheet 132. On sheet 133, published 1953, and reprinted with major roads revised in 1961, sure enough the northern spur near Watford Gap was now labelled M1, and the western continuation of the motorway to Birmingham was now the M45. However on sheet 131 published 1967 and fully revised 1964-65, major roads revised 1967, there is no M45 at all but the A45 appears to follow the same route. Presumably the M45 was demoted from being a motorway, apart from a spur, and eventually the M6 slightly further north replaced it, although this is not depicted on this sheet 131. I cannot remember when the M6 was built. So we have the same bit of road apparently labelled variously over few years. So: please can someone look up sheet 132 to see what happened on that? Can anyone remember when the M6 was built? Was the M1 initially planned to go to Birmingham and were the plans changed and thus the name, or was this an error on the half-inch sheet?