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"Kerry musings"

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Kerry musings

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Railwayana (engine lamps, station signs, whistles), Breweryana (ashtrays advertising beer, pub signs, hand pumps), Banana (CND badges, posters, literature. *Sorry*). Almost every group that one can think of appears to collect peripheral items associated with their subject. Artefacts that originated from the adored. Anything associated with railway companies, breweries, the army, the Preston Guild, even schools is collected. It therefore follows that map enthusiasts would be expected to seek out choice pieces of Ordnance Surveyana. But do they? Of course. Not such a thriving industry as with railway enthusiasts, who have a vast amount of relics at their disposal, but one can still find a little something tucked away in most OS collections. And let me say at this point, that nothing in this piece implies that I have any of this sort of thing, given the sometimes grey legal area in which a lot of ana items exist. Most of the following examples come from a conversation I overheard in a pub. A long time ago. Somewhere. (Probably the Bricklayers Arms, during lunch at the 1989 AGM. Yes, that was it).

The most valued relics are those which either have the name of the parent body integral to the item or are so obviously from the parent body. Just having a name stamped on a standard mass produced item is very low on the list of desirables. Thus a cast iron notice or brass uniform buttons bearing the initials SMJR are far better than a wooden ruler merely stamped Ordnance Survey. (I know that I am taking a big risk in naming certain railway companies and not others, but I am insured). Compared to the Ordnance Survey, the railway companies produced a million times as many things to be collected, and a great number had the company name on them. Stations of all sizes, huge locomotives, carriages, miles and miles of permanent way all provide things to be sought after and collected. But beyond the main building in Southampton and a few regional offices, the OS merely visited places and left little trace of themselves, so there are far fewer items out there. We cannot compete with a railway steam engine, unless one were to find the little pink aeroplane that the OS had, or one of the white Land Rovers with a large Ordnance Survey logo on the side. Even if one of us had these, they would only be of interest because they were linked to the OS by the logos painted onto the otherwise standard item. Neither would be considered in the same class as a working signal box gantry at the bottom of the garden.

No, the larger articles are not really what we want. Try something smaller. The railway people are very fond of cast iron plates of all sorts. Plates from engines, plates saying ‘Keep Out: by Order of the LB&SCR’. Good heavy solid things. Well, we have Ordnance Survey spiders. Spider being a name a member gave to something he spotted in our hall one day *(only joking)*. Concrete triangulation pillars have a brass spider-like piece of equipment embedded in the top surface. Three legs reaching out from a solid circular centre. A perfect example of Ordnance Surveyana and one that would match anything the railway people have. Its merits? Weighty, non-corrosive brass, and as hernia-inducing as any six-figure engine name plate. Well known and satisfying, because few collectors own one. Particularly desirable as they have the magic words ‘Ordnance Survey’ cast around the centre. Not only that, but ‘Triangulation Station’ as well, and, oh joy, the middle circular piece is actually threaded and screws out. As does the even smaller circular centre of the whole thing. Too much. Something to play with, despite it being a precision instrument of sorts. I recently

came across another centre piece, minus the legs. It appears to be older, with a different style of lettering, and a grub screw rather than a split pin holding the smaller piece in place. How exciting. Such would obviously be the start of an arachnid collection should anyone own both. Page 91 of Owen and Pilbeam shows an Ordnance Survey workshop with rows of ana sitting waiting to be collected, this time brass flush brackets. Brackets, like station name signs have a certainty about them, in that they are numbered and the location where they were used (and removed from) can be found. Not quite as exotic, but I do admit to owning a red brick with the three legs of a cut bench mark on it, which a local builder brought me from a wall he had knocked down. Gripping stuff this.

For pure beauty, even the railway world cannot compete with an engraved copper plate. As an ana, it has all the requisites in spades. Top quality metal, nice and heavy, smooth, shiny and so obviously from the idolised source. But the engraving is superb, even if the wrong way around/backwards/reversed. Another call for a second pair of eyes, which could make sense of such engraving without having to hold it to a mirror; whilst some lucky owners might also have a copy of the map produced by their plate. I know of one plate that still has its coating of wax, as used in the production process. This could be quite important, as it shows the thickness of wax used, and could yield the formula for the coating if it no longer exists. Just as the railway people had cast metal signs for all manner of things, so the OS used engraved copper plates for a lot of jobs, not only maps. In the mid-nineteenth century facsimile period, the title pages of the *Domesday Books* yielded copper plates, as did the two small illustrations at the end of each Introduction. Again, good classy Ordnance Surveyana, tucked away in collections. I can see the attraction of owning something like this. The fineness of engraving surely reflects the essence of the OS in the nineteenth century: Precision. Precise, painstaking measurements and mathematical calculations, superb engraving and the need for spot on registration of the different printing plates.

Glass plates used in the printing process are said to have poured out of the OS at one time, destined mainly for home-made greenhouses. Apparently most of the black would come off fairly easily, leaving a good pane of thick glass. A student friend worked in a Swiss-roll factory one summer. His boss always took the free daily allowance of two rolls, and maintained that if left in the shed to dry, they made wonderful firelighters. Similarly, litho stones are said to be found in garden paths in the Southampton area, though I am doubtful about this one, as they were not easy to handle before small dumper trucks appeared. Certainly none exist in the Kerry area.

In the 1980s, Galloway's bookshop in Aberystwyth still had a lovely blue and white glass sign advertising Ordnance Survey maps stuck to the glass panel above the main door. Whenever I visited, I always kept an eye on 'my sign' and was horrified when I eventually saw a skip outside the building. The whole shop had been gutted. I asked when the windows were coming out, was told "next week", and I would have to see the boss about the sign. An hour later, the boss grabbed a large claw hammer, jumped onto a saw stool and eased the hammer claw between the sign and ancient glass panel. My instinct was to turn away, but I watched in order to see where every shattered piece went, so as to be able to collect all of the sign and stick it together again. Within a couple of seconds the two pieces of glass had amiably parted company, both intact, and the sign was mine. A fine, easily handled object compared to the ornate staircase from Earls Court Underground station, which one might have asked a contractor for when it was removed.

The obvious question is whether having a bit of this and a part of that serves any purpose, except to make a home look like the set for Steptoe and Son? So easily a group of artefacts can resemble a museum of bygone days, with totally unconnected items in a glass case and a one line label in front. A shrunken skull from Africa, a lock of the late King's hair and so on. A brass flush bracket, a surveyor's chain, an engraving implement. Not much better, I would say. No, things should be kept in their original place wherever possible, keeping them in context. If something cannot be kept thus, I suppose that the next best thing is that it is 'saved' and kept within the circle of people who care about it and its history. But with the intention of placing it in a suitable setting when possible. And there could be no better setting than the proposed Ordnance Survey Map Experience. On a thirty acre site, with ample parking and refreshments, the whole family will be able to explore the work of the OS, starting with the thrills of measuring the mini base line, hiking to mountain-top trig points, surveying in all weathers (optional classes on higher calculus), practical engraving, printing and collecting maps. Nothing later than 1967.