

A Shepton Diary

Brian Lund with Reflections on another Somerset adventure

It's February so it must be Shepton Mallet! The postcard world revolves around events, rather like farming is dependent on the seasons. Some UK postcard fairs have become annual must-go-to events, and the extravaganza at the West of England Showground - now the world's biggest postcard fair - is obviously one of those. The build-up to the occasion was understandably affected by reports of atrocious weather in the Somerset Levels - would that make travelling hazardous? In the event, the rain deluge had abated a fortnight before the fair, so organisers Barrie and Katie Rollinson were lucky in that respect. Even so, the A39 from the M5 to Shepton was still closed at one point on February 20th, necessitating a diversion. Mary and I decided to drive through Bristol on this occasion on the Thursday afternoon, a straightforward spin via the M4, M32 and A37 at non-peak times.

For some dealers, the Shepton fair is essentially a three-day event as unloading and some trading takes place on the day before public access - though probably only just over half the dealers opt for this extra time commitment. We arrived at two in the afternoon and - amazingly - it felt warm in the hall (essentially a massive cattle shed which feels like an aircraft hangar), at least relatively warm by previous years' standards.

A postcard fair is a strange experience in that, miles from home, you instantly fall in with acquaintances from all over the world. That's the nature of the hobby. Over the next couple of days we talked to hundreds of people about postcards and other issues.

The Thursday is truncated - a maximum of five hours from one till

six. Barrie and Katie have laid on as much tea and coffee as you would ever want to drink and the afternoon passes quickly. Some dealers don't even open up, preferring to look at other traders' stocks. One dealer's strategy is to put out special offers - of bulk cheaper cards, and good-value albums of mixed subjects, and haul in a hefty wedge of cash at the pre-show get-together.

Postcard get-togethers

We've just launched another PPM, so maybe people will have taken it away for a bedtime read? Or maybe not! At six everyone takes off for their various temporary domiciles all over the place. A goodly number seem to have opted for farmhouses or Premier Inn-type establishments, but we have gone again for the Cannard's Well, a pub/hotel a mile and a half from the fair venue. It's cosy, friendly and handy, and the food is good. The bar is heaving with postcard talk,

notably from a table comprising Kevin Jackson from Turkey, Bob Henderson from California, Jose, the Portugese Express', and Dave Strebe from the States. A 'seminar' on how to use the internet to best advantage is part of the agenda. Norwegian Scott Simpson at a barstool with a Scandinavian collector friend adds an extra international flavour.



Postcards as far as the eye can see at Shepton Mallet

There are even a few locals around!

Collectors roll in

The real action begins on the Friday morning, as the rest of the dealers arrive and the public begin to roll in. The vast majority arrive by car, as public transport access is limited - the nearest railway station is six miles away at Castle Cary, and I don't remember seeing a bus anywhere near. The West of England Showground venue is a hotspot for all kinds of events throughout the year, though, so the location obviously works. As 10am

approaches, the queue builds up - I went to take a photo but the alignment of the customers wasn't photogenic (though the people themselves were - disclaimer). Barrie Rollinson is out with the waiting collectors as usual, chatting and encouraging - a walking one-man PR machine. At opening time the hundreds of collectors who have waited patiently are quickly dispersed around the massive room, though lots of them make a beeline for our neighbour, the charismatic Richard Stenlake from Ayrshire, whose annual appearance here is a huge treat. Why is no-one at ours?! The psychology of why collectors choose to start at specific stalls or do the room in a particular direction is a source of never-ending analysis by dealers, some of whom angst constantly about their placement. Over a day, it all works out, and you'd expect most collectors at a major event like this to check out all the stocks. Richard Phillips from Cardiff tells us, though, "With our [club] fair coming up in April I tend to avoid the dealers I know will be with us and concentrate on those I don't normally see". He added that the fair didn't seem as crowded as usual - "it certainly didn't feel like Bipex used to or Birmingham in the 1990s". At the end of the day, how many new cards you find at a fair does tend to colour your opinion of it. Richard did well but his friend Gareth Thomas from Aberdare only found a couple of topographicals ("both of which he

probably already has!"). The sheer scale of the event means that the crowd does appear to be diluted, but when you climb to the first floor and survey the scene from the balcony there, it is quite mind-blowing. Stretched out in front of you is a seething sea of people and post-cards, a concept which would sound unbelievable to non-collectors! How many cards

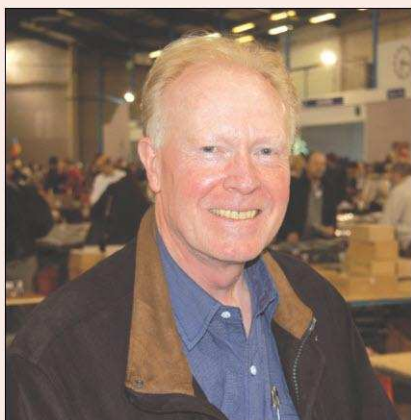
are in the room? I asked several dealers to speculate, and the consensus was around 1.5 to 2.5 million. Another interesting thought - what percentage of the postcards trolleyed in by dealers at the start of the show would have been sold by 4pm on Saturday? Answers on a postcard!

A film production company has arrived, booked by the fair organisers, to set up some footage for the Shepton website. They spend quite a while filming and talking to various people. A chat with Andrew Yatsenko from

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the Ukraine reminds me that a postcard fair is a giant bubble divorced from the real world for the duration of the show. Andrew is obviously concerned about the situation in his home country and particularly Kiev. Events moved astonishingly fast from that day onwards, and at the time of writing are still unfolding. For most, though, a fair is a total diversion, and that outside world rarely intrudes. I do remember, though, being at a collectors' fair at Birmingham's Methodist Hall in October 1981 when news of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's assassination filtered in, I believe via George Sawyer (ex-co-organiser of the Birmingham fair previously referred to). In September 1992, we were at Bipex at Kensington Town Hall when the pound crashed spectacularly after it was kicked out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. One dealer immediately doubled his prices (only joking!). Undoubtedly the most disappointing day, though, was the occasion of the Headingly Ashes Test Match in 1981, when Ian Botham, Graham Lilley and Bob Willis turned around a lost cause to pull off the most spectacular cricket victory in the history of the world! And where were we? Locked in a basement at the Piccadilly Plaza Exhibition Hall in Manchester at Philip Nevitsky's postcard fair, trying desperately to find somewhere to get proper radio reception! Happy days! One of the joys of postcard fairs (especially big international ones) is that you never know who you'll bump into next.



Late morning along comes Canadian Philip Francis (above), who gives me the latest copy of his Vancouver Postcard Club magazine, of which he is the editor. "Toronto gets all the publicity on the Canadian postcard scene", he reckons, "but the Vancouver club is equally thriving!" Indeed, the newsletter is excellent, full of postcard chat, news and reviews about fairs, opinions about collecting styles and trends. I sense that in North America, postcard club magazines must be even more crucial for keeping in touch than in Britain because of the much greater distances involved in any postcard trip.

Controversial topic

Away from the action with a sandwich (though we were remarkably busy for



Shepton fair promoter Barrie Rollinson pioneered the use of balloons (exclusively yellow ones) when he initiated the West Country postcard extravaganza at Yeovil. Here East London Postcards decided to pinpoint their stall with them (great idea - you could see them all round the room!). The line-up from left is Ray, Ivor, Steve & Stevie.

most of the day), I get a chance in mid-afternoon to have a look at the latest newsletter from the Postcard Traders Association, the body that represents the interests of dealers, and which for 35 years organised Bipex/Picture Postcard Show. It is in fact the first proper newsletter for a very long time, and so an excellent thing. The new editor is Michael Goldsmith, who used to pen an entertaining column for PPM. He has also won the 'Best Article' award twice, once notably for a feature on Eric Barton, one of the legends of the postcard collecting revival. Aside from news items, the newsletter is focused on the late Drene Brennan and the Postcard Club of Great Britain, and on an article by Michael which asks if the hobby is on the slide. Ever controversial and unafraid to provide an opinion, Michael attributes what he calls "a rocky patch" to the abandonment of the Picture Postcard Show three years ago, and the decline of postcard clubs - "almost all of the UK's postcard clubs are struggling" he opines. I had suggested to him that an ageing demographic was the main reason for this, but Michael disagreed, maintaining that postcard collecting has always been the preserve of the middle-aged and above, as it is based primarily on nostalgia. I would, however, ask Michael to consider this: when he founded the two postcard clubs that he famously pioneered, Wealden and West London, what was the average age of their membership and what is the average age today? Michael is also kind enough to analyse PPM's past and current sales figures (which he doesn't actually know) and comments that the classified adverts section has shrunk. Well, of course it has! Where once collectors needed to

advertise in literature for their wants, they can now pore over internet offers and hence have less need to use PPM for advertising. That is just the way the world has moved. Michael doesn't quite see it that way and suggests that PPM "has lost its mojo", which might mean that it has become overwhelmed, stressed-out, frumpy, tired, bored or lethargic - missing its special power, drive or energy that is synonymous with effectiveness and success. Apparently this is largely because Michael Goldsmith (and the late John H.D. Smith) no longer writes for us (his choice, not ours). Well, Michael, we hope not! We spend much time trying to keep PPM fresh and stimulating... Anyway, Michael's remedies to rejuvenate a hobby he sees as in need of a lift are the re-instigation of the Picture Postcard Show (at Kensington Town Hall or Twickenham Rugby Ground, or somewhere in the provinces, with a maximum of £200 a stall), an overall body for postcard clubs which would revive a national display competition, a couple of 'general' articles in PPM "to increase its interest value", and for dealers to be more promotionally-minded.

Collectors of modern postcards must have had a field day at the fair, with plenty of material from dealers on both sides of the Channel. Graham Richardson told us that "buying was absolutely fantastic!" Top modern sales were of Concorde, film stars/posters, and - curiously - owls, apparently a popular postcard theme. He reckoned that Shepton was definitely his favourite fair and said he wasn't bothered by the fact that it is held in a cattle shed. "I just love being there! I was so excited!" A lot of people feel the same - yet this is a fair in the middle of nowhere (apologies to all Somerset readers - it's a beautiful county). Barrie Rollinson has managed to turn conventional wisdom on its head by running a successful postcard fair that is not in the middle of or close to a large conurbation, and for that he deserves much credit.

By closing time on Friday, there are still plenty of collectors in the fair, which has held up very well all day. Barrie and Katie seem happy with the result, and can relax a little... but only a little. Running any collectors' fair is a daunting task, but this particular one must be more akin to a nightmare - the logistics of getting 140+ dealers and hundreds of collectors into a venue and making sure everything - from parking, unloading, lighting, heating, refreshments, safety, first aid, security, a satisfactory spend, and a host of other things it's sometimes impossible to estimate - works smoothly are mind-boggling. Promoters even seem to have a responsibility for the weather! I suppose if 90% of attendees go home happy, then that's a result!

Tonight at the Cannard's Well there's a problem with the delivery of food, as it appears there's something of a staff shortage and the meals take an interminable time to arrive. Mike Clark, from Cologne, where they are obviously used to total efficiency, had an interchange which led to the offer of free liqueur coffees for his table. Unfortunately, the right sort of cream wasn't available, so they ended up as Americanos with a sideshot of whisky. The bar

is crowded, primarily with postcard people again, and the Wales-France rugby match on the television provides a diversion. After this has finished, an impromptu cabaret springs up. This is actually a tradition begun by Shropshire dealer Peter Robards a few years ago, when he brought along his guitar and performed a few excellent folk songs while Keith Hough from North Wales chimed in with a selection of pop favourites. This time, there's no Peter, who opted not to come to Shepton, but



for the second year in a row the presence of Alec Wallace from Lancashire injects pizzazz into proceedings. Alec belts out a number of standards from musicals such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, delivered a *capella* with dramatic interpretation. He captivates the audience. Interspersed with this is a selection from the aforementioned Keith Hough, a stunning rap number from American (via Turkey) Kevin Jackson, and a series of contributions from PPM's editor, culminating in a duet with Keith and backing from the assembled ensemble on a rendition of *American Pie*. It all seems to go down well, as the food had done when it finally reached us.

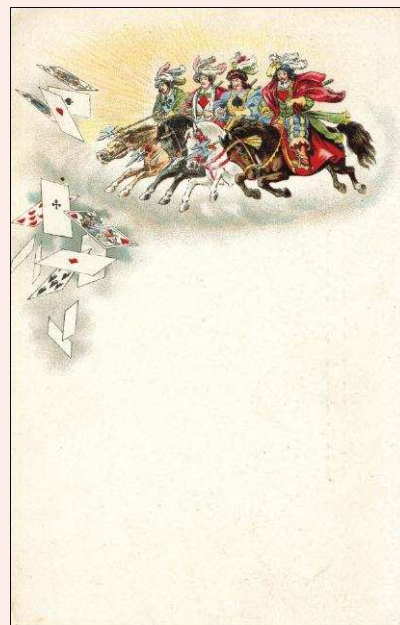
Last lap

And there's still another day of the fair to go! Saturday opens to the public at 9.30, but you'd be pushed to claim that the initial visitors represented a queue. Still, a constant flow of collectors comes in, and the day is adequately populated, though nowhere near the extent of the previous day. In some respects, this is a mystery. Why is the Friday attendance better than the Saturday one, especially when the latter would appear to be more convenient? The obvious explanation is that collectors want to be in as early as possible to find the choicest postcards. But that only really applies to those specialist themes or areas that experienced collectors want. By Saturday closing time there will still be a million or more cards unsold. Some gems are bound to be among them! It is even so a constant truth of two or multi-day fairs that the first day will always be the best attended, regardless of which day of the week it is held on, which begs the question... why not a Tuesday/Wednesday fair? Or Saturday/Sunday? Or Sunday/Monday? Does it matter which day(s) of the week a postcard fair is held on?

Today is a much better second day than usual, it seems, a worthwhile stay for most dealers. With two-day events, a small minority of dealers opt to stand for one day only - but whichever they pick, the chances are they'll miss out on something they wish they hadn't done. Many collectors return for a second bite of the cherry, having turned the fair into a holiday break. Things begin to wind down from early afternoon and a few overseas dealers escape a touch early, as is their normal practice - the demands of travelling time rule, to avoid another overnight stay. Again, though,

there is plenty of action until close to the end. Most collectors I spoke to during the fair were very appreciative of it. "I had an absolutely brilliant time at Shepton. Always do!" John Purr from Berkshire told us, a typical response. Diane Wood from Chard has a great time explaining to dealers that she collects postcards of buttons! She had some problem with the continental sellers, and only managed to get

halfway round the hall in a day! Suddenly, and after a whirlwind few days, the show is over for another year. Some dealers are off to London Clerken-well the following day, and one stays for a flea market in the same Shepton hall. For others it's a chance to regroup. Barrie will be there until 7 o'clock, almost three hours after closing time, having tied



Ned Paul from Twickenham reckoned this was his best postcard find of the weekend, a French postcard bought from a Dutch dealer. With a pretty mature card-playing collection, Ned finds it difficult to pick up new material, but with still incomplete sets he keeps looking.

up the loose ends and swept the hall floor, despite having to pay a sum for it to be cleaned anyway. That's dedication! He was pleased with the overall attendance, given the perceptions about the county being flooded and inaccessible, and relieved everything went pretty well. The show causes him many sleepless nights in advance. Now his planning begins for the next Rollinson spectacular at Huntingdon in July.



Insider knowledge. Mick Liversidge (Cobweb Postcards Easingwold, on the left) and Bill Kirkland (Stone, Staffordshire) swap postcard tips or maybe social gossip? The pair have been known to suffer mistaken identity issues, so here they are on pictorial record to clarify the situation

Retirement show: Card Times editor David Stuckey and wife Joan have decided to end their involvement with the magazine for cigarette card collectors and the Cigarette Card Convention at Southport this month will be their swansong. David stresses he will still be working on his other literary projects, though. Card Times is likely to be sold to John Devaney of the Reading Card Club, and the May / June issue will be David and Joan's last.

