

BOOK REVIEWS



Richard Sawyer

As they are or as they were ...

RICHARD SAWYER REVIEWS

ENGLISH COUNTRY BOOKSHOPS

*Being a Further Part of a Pictorial Record of
The Antiquarian Book Trade: Portraits & Premises*

By David Chambers

Private Libraries Association/Antiquarian Booksellers Association

Oblong sm 4to • green cloth with contrasting gilt title piece on upper cover

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IT MAY have been ten years in production, and several of the shops featured may have closed or altered their *modus operandi*, nevertheless this publication is an absolute joy. For the student of the book trade the text, giving as it does the brief history of each firm, will be a first point of reference when researching provenance and history. The copious black-and-white photographs will always trigger happy moments for those who visited these shops. Portraits of owners and views of their shops, both inside and out, are evocative and true to their subject. For those denied the privilege of a visit, it will conjure up a faithful image, just short of a mirage, of some twentieth-century country bookshops. David Chambers deserves to be congratulated on both text and photography. It may have been a decade in the making but it is a job well done, for which praise and thanks are due.

The format naturally follows the two earlier publications in the series, *The London Bookshop*, Parts I and II (Private Libraries Association, 1971 and 1976). These, edited by Richard Brown and Stanley Brett, covered in total nineteen London bookshops. Once again, by the time of publication many were moving or ceasing to be. That matters not; what does matter is that man records his history and travel

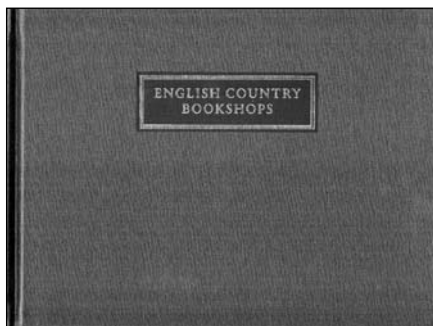
down the path of evolutionary change. The speed of that change is accelerating, so we should be grateful that these three books are 'in the can'.

The bookshops and businesses featured in this volume read like the stops on an old-fashioned buying trip, but not in the order that they would be visited. They are

George Bayntun, Bow Windows, Claude Cox, Hollet & Son, Howes, Ken Spelman, Robert Steedman, Ticehurst Bookshop, Charles Traylen and John Turton. The writer must admit that there are two on this list he has never visited and two omitted that he would have included in his buying trip around England – both are 'up

north'. Modern methods of dealing have all but consigned the old-fashioned buying trip to the past. This is a great pity as not only did it give you the opportunity of meeting old friends and browsing through books without hassle, but also, after day three, a decent hotel was required with a lock-up garage (the car was filling up with books and thus there was a security issue). Dinner needed to be more than acceptable, and accompanied by a palatable claret, as the potential profit of the trip was contemplated.

The text and photographs stir up nostalgic memories, but credit must also be given to the founders and their successors ►



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who, often through adversity, founded these emporiums and flourished. The secret of some may have been their catchment area, with the potential to buy well. For others it was being not too far off the beaten track, giving the opportunity to sell to both trade and private customers. Whatever: as, often, the 'local bookshop' they gave us a cultural amenity, essential to nineteenth-century country society, akin to the Parish Church, local pub and Post Office; a place to be visited on a Saturday or Sunday morning. Alas, the viability of all four is now under question.

For those who already own the first two books in this series, this is a 'must' to keep the run complete. In these days, when one is asked to pay up to £15 for a new hardback without even a portrait frontispiece, this copiously illustrated volume appears to be very reasonably priced at £20. It is limited to 1,500 copies of which only 800 are for sale. *The London Bookshop*, Part I, was similarly limited to 1,500 copies, with 700 for sale. This is now a scarce volume on its own. *The London Bookshop*, Part II, was published in an edition of 2,000 and is more readily available. A pair of both volumes appears on the web at between £50 and £100. Thus one can not grumble at the price of this publication.

Of immense sadness is the fact that Alan Shelley, charismatic President of the ABA and owner of Bow Windows Bookshop, passed away while the work was at the binders. It has therefore been fittingly dedicated to him with the inclusion of a loosely inserted dedication slip that bears his portrait. Will all new owners please lightly affix this slip to the half-title with vegetable glue (not Sellotape or other such caustic agent!): it will only add to the melancholy and nostalgia if your copy has to be catalogued further down the line as 'lacking dedication slip'. The volume as published lacks nothing in bringing pleasure to the bibliophile. ■



dedicated to
ALAN SHELLEY
PRESIDENT of the
Antiquarian Booksellers Association
who died on 18 November 2009
while this book was at
the binders