

Bound for the museum?

George Ringrose considers the growing options when it becomes time to part with your collection

Imagine the scenario. You've been collecting for years and have formed possibly the finest collection of material ever assembled in your chosen field of interest. It breaks your heart to see it go, but circumstances dictate that you must dispose of your beloved collection as you have no family member interested in developing it. What's the best way of parting with it without losing the valuable research contained in the writing-up? If you instantly think that a museum is your only option for keeping it intact, then you're clearly out of date with your thinking. This is the 21st century, after all, and technology is now at an advanced enough level to provide some potentially appealing solutions.

Producing a printed colour book of every album page you may want to sell means your collection will be properly recorded and can be deposited in major philatelic and relevant national libraries. This option is popular right now thanks to cheaper printing. Writing and self-publishing a detailed handbook on the subject based on the material you hold is also within the capabilities of many collectors.

Or why not consider issuing the pages free as PDFs on the internet, if you can find a willing host, such as a specialist society? The website Exponet (www.exponet.info) already enables hundreds of collections to be viewed, saved or printed from any computer worldwide. Selling an electronic disk of the album pages is also gaining in popularity because when 600dpi tif files are produced, it enables collectors to examine extreme close-ups of the items on screen alongside their own material. But the option I personally favour is a traditionally printed book with an electronic disk inserted within – a combination that results in the best of both worlds.

If selling by traditional auction appeals, then houses will normally produce a major 'named' sale catalogue or handbook of lasting value, although rarely will every album page be depicted, so much of the information will still be lost to all except the purchasers of individual lots. Unless you're lucky enough to sell your entire collection as one entity.

If, despite all these options, you still conclude that donating to a museum is your preferred option, then do consider the following. If a collection is donated under the terms of a will without prior notification to a museum, it may well be accepted, but could subsequently be sold if their acquisition and disposal policy allows for this. Even if it is retained, the material may never be put on public display, so access to it by potential researchers may be difficult. It also deprives fellow collectors the opportunity to acquire your philatelic gems, possibly for all time. Financially, remember that there may be income tax or probate advantages – or disadvantages – in either giving the material away or selling it, depending on your unique tax circumstances. Professional advice should be sought before making any decision.

Of course, it's an entirely personal choice. Do let us know your opinions on this thorny issue and we will publish the best responses and thoughts. Whatever you decide, don't let the worst thing happen – allowing your valuable research to be lost to future generations.