

Bertram
ROTA

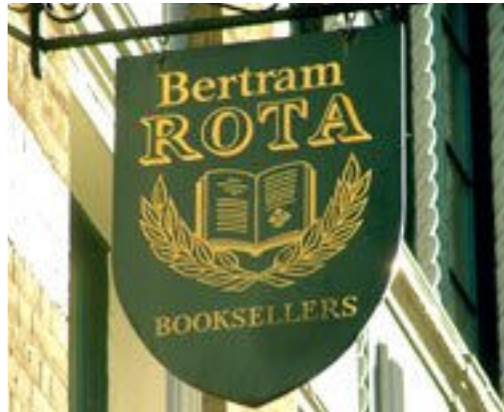


Celebrating One Hundred Years

1923-2023

August

Giving up the shop



We attracted and still attract considerable flak from various quarters for this decision, which had not been easy to make. At a sumptuous village garden party thrown by local authors Robert Harris and Gill Hornby, the renowned collector Franklin Brooke-Hitching and I were chatting and I mentioned what we were going to do. “But you can’t, you’re an icon!” he said. Minutes later, with the decency with which I associate him, he came back over. “I’m sorry I said that, it wasn’t fair. You must of course do what is right for you.”

The decline in the number of physical bookshops is hardly news. I can remember when it seemed that every village in the country had three things: a church, a pub and a bookshop. I did not know then that the last two of these were endangered species. Some of the most enjoyable times for generations of booksellers involved driving around the country on buying expeditions, returning with a bootful of fresh stock and perhaps happy memories of convivial times with other dealers. It is not impossible now but it is bracing to think how few cities let alone villages have secondhand or antiquarian bookshops at all.

Like so many others, with great regret, we had to look at what was happening and prevaricate no longer. Footfall had been steadily declining and costs rising, not least Westminster’s business rates (I wrote to them when we had left saying that little gave me more pleasure than the thought of never having to deal with them again – I spoke too soon, they were after us again recently for payments on the property we had vacated a decade ago, which it took hours, days, weeks to convince them of), rent, utilities, insurance, staff, repairs and cleaning. Insurance would be less expensive and the rest would simply disappear. We would be able to claim back a portion of our household bills as business expenses. Almost all of our sales were already taking place online. Another major factor was commuting. I have already mentioned my wish to spend more time with my children as they grew up, but it was not the only imperative. Dorothea and I commuted from our present home every working day for years, ten years in fact, although less often than every day towards the end, which was not only extremely expensive but massively time-consuming. Working or even reading on trains is possible but very far from ideal and worst of all was being at the mercy of the farcical unreliability of the public transport system, which seems to have become even worse since. On a good day the round trip would take four hours, each. The equivalent of a working week sitting on uncomfortable, noisy, trains which smelt of the toilets, or hanging around on station platforms in all weathers waiting for trains which never came. On bad days, which were frequent, there could be an extra hour or more, the expense of taxis when trains did not connect and a great deal of stress. We had no planned social life during the week because we could never be sure when we were going to get home. It might be six o’clock, or eight. We started to feel we were in a work, eat, sleep, repeat pattern.

We can never know how much business we have lost as a result of closing the premises in 2013, but I suspect not terribly much. We welcome visitors here where they can examine books at leisure and of course thank the stars for ABE, by which means we and every other bookseller reaches customers worldwide who would otherwise have remained entirely unknown to us. The effects of the internet on the trade have been mixed, a debate I won’t go into here, but I never did understand the Luddite brigade of the Antiquarian Booksellers’

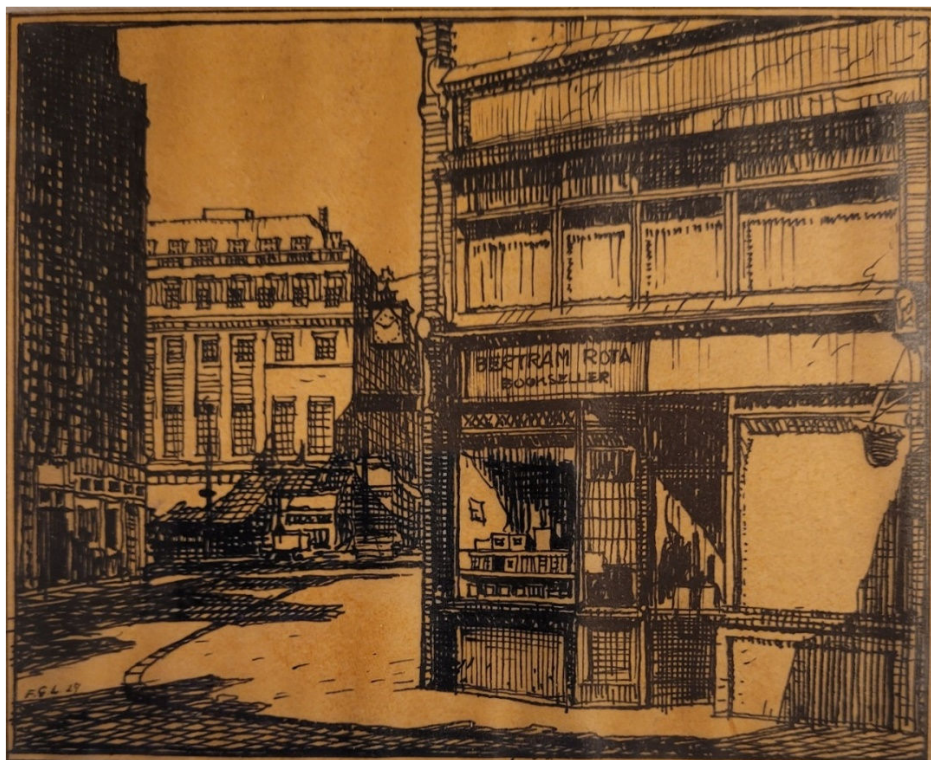
Association who used to say that they hated ABE with a hard and gem-like flame, which to my mind, for all of its flaws (which are mostly to do with other booksellers and their pricings), seems to me an extraordinarily well-run and efficient operation with very reasonable fees for their services. Personally I love technology (and gadgets, especially gadgets), terrifying though some aspects of it are (privacy is a thing of the past, that's for sure, I just accept cookies now, the marketers and data miners must have all the information they could possibly want already). The internet is here, no one is going to switch it off, and I cannot see the point, then or now, of moaning about or railing against what has become, for us at least, an essential selling platform.

Of course it was a huge wrench. "The shop" had been a huge presence in my life more or less from the cradle, and on the very last day Peter Scott and I looked around at the bare walls, empty shelves and abandoned desks, had a generous glass of whisky or two (Peter had thoughtfully brought a bottle in with him), and then simply ... left. It felt almost surreal.

I remember Peter's saying that my biggest problem would be finding time to get everything done, but the opposite was the case. Those commuting hours saved more than made up for the time any extra business admin took up.

Bookshops have their own unique atmospheres and their disappearance is a sadness, but they never were, as some would like to think, museums or temples of academia. They were and are retail businesses, places of trade. To make it one's life's work to pretend otherwise, as one ABA stalwart seems to do, is pompous and absurd. And it is hardly just bookshops that have abandoned the high streets.

The first address I remember is Savile Row. As I wrote in the *Festschrift* for my father, I fondly recall my brother and I visiting as two small boys, rushing excitedly to the packing room with its interesting smells of glue and brown paper, and, best of all, large cardboard boxes. The full-time packer (there were two at one point), Jack Griffiths, kindly indulged us, playing hide and seek and pretending not to know which box we were hiding in when it was time to go.

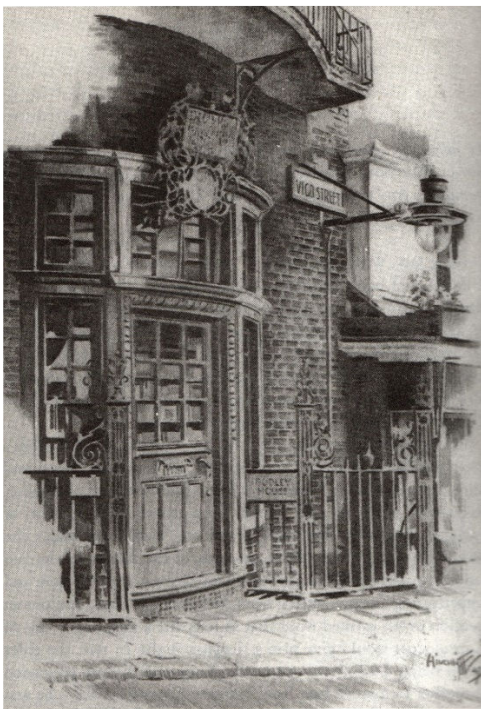


Davies Street



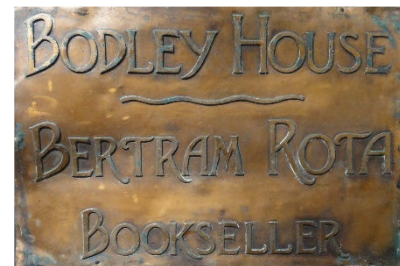
Old Burlington Street

Before Savile Row (numbers 4, 5 and 6), whence my father was one of those who complained to the police about the noise when the Beatles played on the roof of the adjacent Abbey Studios, and also about the parking of one of their Rolls Royces, to which a policeman explained: "There's no point giving them a ticket sir. It'll just be like sixpence to them.", which I have always found not mortifying but absolutely hilarious, were 109 Charing Cross Road, 76a Davies Street, 14 Old Burlington Street, and Bodley House, Vigo Street. Afterwards 30-31 Long Acre, then Langley Court and finally back to Long Acre. There were various secondary outlets, one in the City of London, Frank Hollings Bookshop in Cloth Fair, taken over when Dusty Miller retired, and The Haslemere Bookshop, and latterly warehouses and other storage spaces, memorably in Mercer Street, Covent Garden, and less conveniently in Tottenham. Westminster sent bailiffs round to the shop for Mercer Street rates months after the building had been completely demolished.



Bodley House by Jock Hinchliffe, 1947, and R.C. Lodge

We certainly had our share of celebrity visitors even in my time. The comedian Dave Allen used to come just before Christmas every year to buy a gift for a friend. He was the epitome of gentlemanly charm. Once I'd just been to see him perform at the Palace Theatre, Manchester (I have rarely laughed so much or so hard in my life) and when I mentioned it he said "Next time, be sure to let me know and I'll sort you out with some tickets and you can come backstage afterwards." Elizabeth Jennings would sell autograph poems in batches on a fairly regular basis. She was delightful. A runner who used to come in most days barefacedly cornered and buttonholed her on the street just as she had left on one occasion, trying to steal her business. "Thank you so much," she said, "I will ask Mr Rota what he thinks and let you know what he says." Authors and actors were regulars, some of those authors impecunious and importunate. But the best times must have been before my day when Graham Greene and other literary giants would call in regularly, sometimes to sign books, sometimes to sell them, or a handful of manuscripts, or purely socially, for a drink and a cigar with Bertram perhaps, or a long lunch with Anthony. Others included H.E. Bates, Cyril Connolly, A.E. Coppard, Dylan Thomas, Robert Graves, Sir Alec Guinness, Claude Houghton, C.P. Snow, Sir Ralph Richardson and Richard Llewellyn. The late Robert Mayall, when he was working for the firm, arranged a meeting with Kingsley Amis. My father and he took him to the Garrick Club around the corner. At the bar he asked for a whisky, which he downed in a nanosecond. "Mr Rota," said Robert immediately, "I think Kingsley would rather like another whisky now."



Bertram and Anthony in the doorway of Bodley House and the original sign

Less welcome were shoplifters, whose predations we suffered from time to time. After a while I began to share with more experienced colleagues a sort of sixth sense about them when they came in. Most memorably, whilst I was working elsewhere, I had a call from a man offering a book outside that firm's usual specialities, an eighteenth-century travel book which seemed an odd thing for someone to own and sell on its own. He said he had been to Sotheby's and Christie's but now wanted a quick sale for, as I recall, £650. Something didn't feel right. He never showed up. About a week later he telephoned again, this time with exactly the same story and the same price, but for a completely different book. I rang around Quaritch, Maggs, Pickering and so on and quickly discovered that one of them had had just that book recently go missing. I called the police who promised to be there quickly. When the man arrived they were nowhere to be seen, and so for twenty minutes I had to pretend to be taking phone calls and looking at bibliographies to research the book further. When they did turn up, he was arrested and taken away. Rather excitingly, I was summoned to Bow Street police station that evening to be interviewed. The young officer told me he knew the thief was guilty straight away "because he didn't say anything. I could tell he'd been arrested before. Innocent people tend to talk all the time, they want to know what's going to happen to them." I asked him about the boot marks on the walls of the grim interview room. "Oh, that's from kicking suspects' heads, probably." When the suspect's house was raided they found it full of stolen books and artworks of all kinds. Not quite the heroics of Eddie Bayntun-Coward who famously rugby-tackled a thief fleeing through Berkeley Square with swag

from Maggs under his coat, but there was another occasion when I impressed the police. They came in with a small stack of recovered stolen books and asked if any of them were ours. “They’ve got these slips in them.” Well that one is from Pickering & Chatto, that’s Quaritch ... As we went through them I realised I was being looked at as though I had some Sherlockian superpowers. “How on earth do you know?” “Well, it’s the typeface and the cataloguing style. Only Quaritch descriptions have those headlines in small caps ...”

I was once accused of theft myself. My father and I had been out to buy some books from the widow of a collector, for a price which was more than fair. She suddenly appeared at the shop later in the day, convinced she had been swindled and that I had stolen one of the books. I think the poor woman was suffering from mental health issues. She called the police, who came promptly. That young officer got the measure of the situation straight away, told her to stop wasting everyone’s time and gently sent her home. As he left, he asked, “You haven’t got any books on fishing have you?”

So yes, there is much to be missed and not to be missed. But it is not as though we no longer meet collectors, authors or other creators of archives, we just meet them in different places and circumstances. I certainly don’t miss London on any personal level, a relatively rural environment is where I feel at home, although I grew up in the north London suburbs and loved living near Portobello Road for a few years in my twenties.



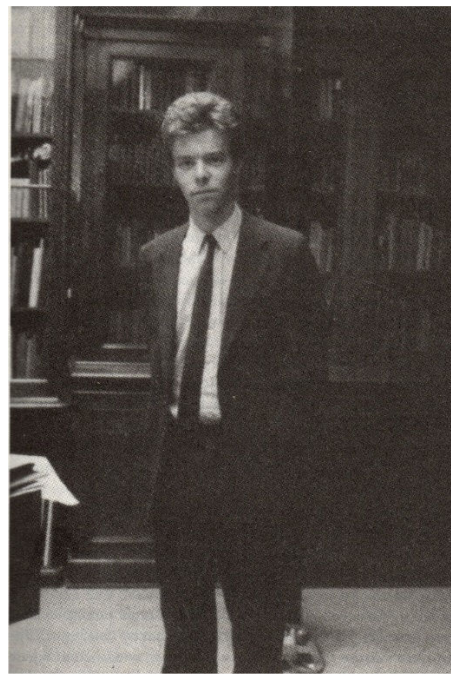
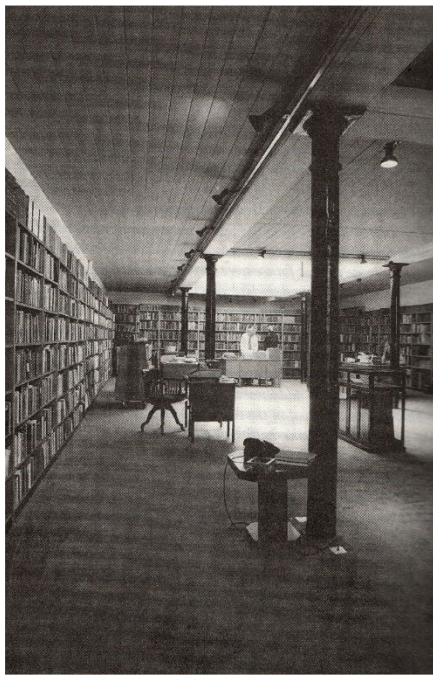
Long Acre

The Long Acre building was very special, originally a coachworks (you can still just make out the lettering at the top of the frontage), then a banana warehouse. When my father and George Lawson purchased it, just before property values soared after the fruit and vegetable market had gone elsewhere, I thought they were mad to have done so – it was in a pretty terrible state. But it was restored to its original elegant beauty. The

only problem was that casual passers-by didn't tend to realise, seeing the pillared ground floor, the expanse of carpet and the desks right back at the far end, that it was a bookshop.

Some of the shop pictures are taken from my father's memoirs, *Books in the Blood*. Flicking through it I came across a story I had completely forgotten. It isn't relevant here, but it's holiday season and it takes me right back to what is now a long time ago. Everything about it, including the telling of it, has the essence of Anthony Rota about it. It reminded me too of my earliest days in the shop when he asked, to my horror, if I would like us to be known as Mr Rota Junior and Mr Rota Senior. Just no. It's 1975 and I am fourteen years old and in my second year at Highgate School.

As one of his extra-curricular activities [Julian] had joined the Printing Society, which produced programmes and tickets for school concerts and plays, and things of that sort. I passed the school on my drive home from work, and on this day it had been arranged that I would collect him from the school gate and take him home. After the ritual exchange of greetings, Julian began tentatively: "Dad, I've got ink all over my shirt. Do you think there'll be trouble?" Now before our marriage his mother worked first for Cassell's and then for Collins, and I was able to say "Julian, as long as its printing ink I think you will be all right." And so it proved.



Long Acre interior and young Julian therein, c. 1984

I am grateful to everyone who has responded kindly, warmly and encouragingly to these musings so far and hope those of you in the UK have managed to find some respite from this very rainy summer.

Julian Rota