Collecting Shire Albums

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"Collecting is an infection which is more intractable than any virus and from which there is no inoculation and no immunity." Arthur Sackler

So said Arthur Sackler (1913-1987), a physician, philanthropist and art collector who gathered the world's largest collection of Chinese art.

Alongside my eclectic needlework tool treasures is a small collection of Shire books, some slender well-loved older ones with black and white images, others are newer and thicker with colour illustrations. One of these is *30 years of Shire Publications, a bibliography for collectors, 1962-91,* a guide to collecting these books. This contains the list of the amazingly broad range of subjects that Shire have published. Who could resist *Trapping and Poaching (34), Cricketing Bygones (90), Old Lawnmowers (91),* or *Scottish Doocots (190)*? There are 23 Shire titles in the NTCSA library in Melbourne.

Shire Publications were started in 1962 by John Rotheroe and John HInton, who began with a 24 page give-away guide, *Discovering East Suffolk,* which was financed by advertisements for local businesses. Rotheroe realising the potential for selling similar publications and went on to produce the *Discovering* series which were initially focussed on locations. *Discovering Brasses (9)* was the first non geographical subject of this group which grew to 282 titles by1990.

John Rotheroe and his wife, with a small team operated the business out of their twin gabled 17th century home, Cromwell House, in Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, UK for many years. In 1972, *Lifeline,* a series of 48 page illustrated biographies was started. The first in this series was *Isambard Kingdom Brunel,* the British engineering genius whose designs created many of the railways, dockyards and iron steamships of the19th century. Forty two LIfeline titles had appeared by 1991. These included artists, soldiers and politicians. Gradually Shire expanded to cover social and industrial history, gardens, ornithology and archeology, even *The Archeology of Rabbit Warrens* (88). A librarian researched to find obscure subjects which had rarely been written about. Shire Publications also produced several other series of books, from their Gothick Guides (myths, mysteries and superstitions of several counties) to their fourteen Shire Egyptology books and History in Camera.

In 1973, Shire Album's first title appeared, *Vintage Farm Machines* (1). The early Albums had 32 pages, black and white photographs and about 5000 words of text written by experts for enthusiasts. Alphabetically subjects range from *The AA* to *Writing Antiques.* Amongst Shire's 1000+ titles are about 50+ Albums relating to textiles, costumes and

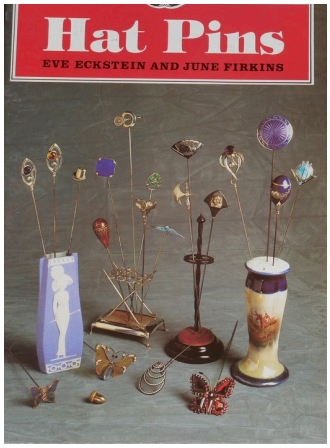
needlework. On the back cover of each book is a synopsis of the contents and a brief biography of the author/s. Eleanor Johnson's *Thimbles and Thimble Cases* has been particularly popular selling 120,000 copies between 1982 and 2008. Eleanor Johnson was born in 1921 and enjoyed many forms of needlework and crafts. With her husband, she went on to run an antique business focussing on small collectables. The 1990's saw the Albums format being updated with colour and with more pages.

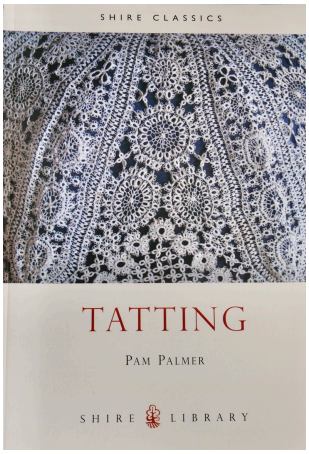
In 2007, the Rotheroes sold the business to Osprey Publishing, a specialist in military history books. Then the Shire Library series began in 2008, revisiting many older titles with new cover designs, expanding and retaining the numbering system, as well as introducing new titles, such as *Garden Gnomes, a History* of *NHS, Britain's National Health Service 1948-2020*! In 2010 Osprey was taken over by Bloomsbury Publishing, a worldwide publishing house whose range includes the Harry Potter books. Alongside the quintessential British heritage entity there is also the Shire USA Library with titles such as *King of the RV's*, *Breweriana* and *Route 66*!

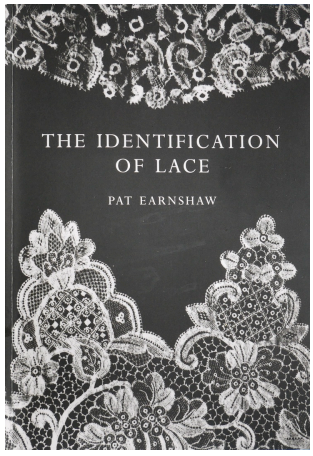
First editions Shire books can be recognised by the words "First published (year)" appearing in their copyright page. Researching this article I discovered many are now available as ebooks, on Kindle or Kobo. I am not sure that these will achieve quite same place in my heart.

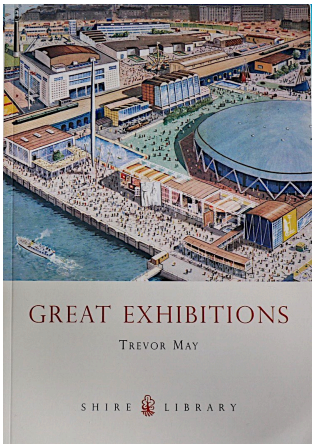
Reference:

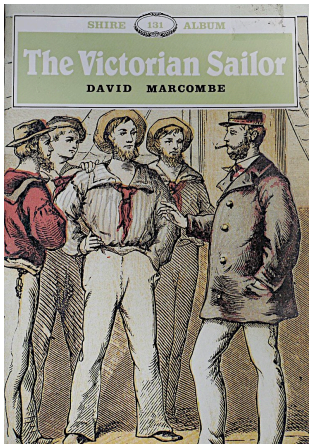
30 years of Shire Publications, A Bibliography for collectors 1962-91

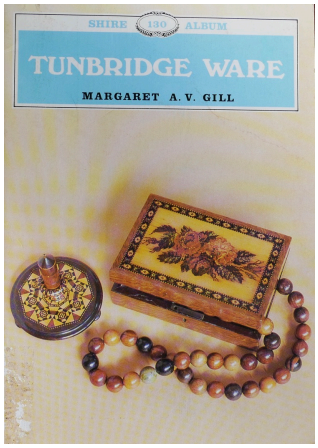


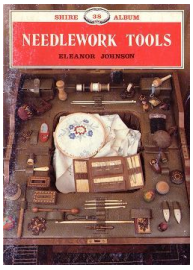


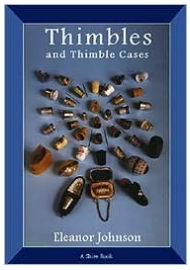


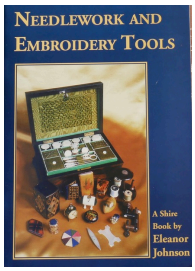


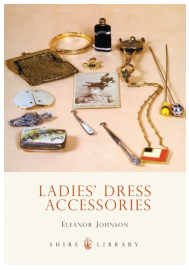












Five Shire Albums by Eleanor Johnson:
L-R: Needlework Tools, 1978. Fashion Accessories, 1980. Thimbles and Thimbles Cases, 1999. Needlework and Embroidery Tools, 2001. Ladies Dress Accessories, 2008.