

MSG Auction Review by Rob Holley

- A response by Andrew Norris

I enjoyed reading Rob's review of the sale as it raised many points some of which touch on the oft discussed future of the hobby, let alone our Group and its auctions. The auction overall was a grand success in my opinion during which we virtually cleared the material we received from the collection of the late Bill Reeves and other vendors. The main thing that has upset Rob it seems is the number of unsolds but many of these came from one source which by the nature of the beast had variable quality. The same vendor also got some good prices but this was for more difficult to find stamps in cracking good condition.

I would rather not discuss individual lots or groups from this auction in a critical fashion because over the years many people have been good enough to take on the job of being an auction secretary for the Group. These good people have of course varied in their skills at either describing or administration of an auction but were prepared to 'have a go'. Most were happy to receive constructive criticism but almost at every turn there has some smart Alec who 'wouldn't have done it that way' or 'I could have told you that wasn't right!' Everyone has an opinion about auctions – whether they have run one or not. Even constructive criticism may be taken the wrong way and upset those who have worked so damn hard on bringing the vast majority of us this auction to savour. Thus I speak in general terms only.

Some of the problems Rob discusses brings back memories of circa 1970 when I joined a steep learning curve as a trainee auction describer. Lotting, price, condition are all critical and you have to get them right within a pretty narrow tolerance. Demand is also relevant because no matter how rare something is if no one wants it or can pay a fair price for it the item will not sell.

Fear of the pernicky buyer or of getting returned lots can lead to over describing the faults on things but such people are a minority. The best illustration that they are a minority is the people who peddle duff material on EBay who have 100% sales records. That is because anyone who is unhappy with a purchase has their money refunded but the greater majority sadly keep the fake, the forged or the fudged, say nothing, and keep the crooks in business.

If you do concentrate on mentioning just the faults then you are looking after the buyers interests but not those of the vendor. Thus **balance** in a description is as equal import as accuracy. In my experience there are very few stamps, proofs, covers or other philatelic items that can be described as simply 'fine'. Consider how many different things can affect the value of any one thing but stop if you get to double figures! Thus many fine and collectable items do have something not 100% about them. Hence the balance is absolutely necessary or you just make everything sound turgid or second rate. The condition conscious bidders then either fail to bid or certainly curtail their enthusiasm and prices drop.

An example of this might be a cover that has had a tough life with a bit of rough opening, slightly soiled and creased but overall remains a good item and attractive.

Yes you must mention all the faults but if you don't say it remains a good and attractive item you can't get many points out of ten! A balanced description that is fair to seller and buyer is about the best you can ever hope for as a describer.

This is not meant to be a condescending piece and I hope it doesn't come across that way but I hope sharing a bit of what I learnt the hard way all those years ago might answer some of Rob's points.

The final main point I would tackle is that of the minimum reserve which has been at £10 for some time now. The arguments for and against are the same as when the minimum was raised from £5 to £10 which caused much debate in Committee at the time. Will we lose some interesting items being offered at the minimum? Will people just shove their £5 lots in at £10 instead? Does this reduce the service we are offering members? To varying degrees the answer to all these was and will be yes but didn't make any material difference long term.

Neither did it boost the packet materially after the minimum was raised to £10 and some packet vendors do include items in excess of £10 in any case. Unsold charges are an administrative nightmare for those running the auctions and their work load has to be considered first.

The only person who really counts on this particular point is our current auction hero - Roger Barry. He does return unsuitable material and we must leave it to him to judge and perhaps encourage him to get tougher on such unwanted or probably unsaleable lots. No doubt the odd healthy debate will ensue but we should leave it to him.

I am reminded of the famous stalker at Twickenham when Rob finishes 'I doubt we shall see its like again.' and can only say have a good look in passing! You had to be a member for some years to see all of Bill's archival material but I doubt any of us saw all of his stuff until it was catalogued for sale. Particularly the material we sold. I have no doubt the same sentiment was expressed when the De La Rue archives were dispersed and when Bill, said he had the money and enjoyed spending it, corralled a large part of the F.M.S. material. The way I look at it is that Bill's collection of proofs, etc., actually stopped anyone else from forming a serious traditional collection of the F.M.S. tigers, etc., but that is now possible. Sorry to see it go but well done Bill and here is to the future!

A sincere thank you to all the people who worked on this auction which produced a good result and if any one has any doubt then please note this. The estimates on some Reeves material was sensibly low but that so many chugged their way up to a multiple of the reserve, some to an eye watering level, indicates clearly the auction worked. We are very lucky to have this asset in the Group and it is I am sure one of several reasons why we maintain a good level of membership and activity. Very, very few other societies have anything like our auctions and most can only observe our success. Well done everyone!

