

School in Heliopolis and home at RAF Moascar set the scene for a life-long love of Egypt, its way of life and especially its countryfolk. Via archaeology, newspapers and postal history, the path was clear



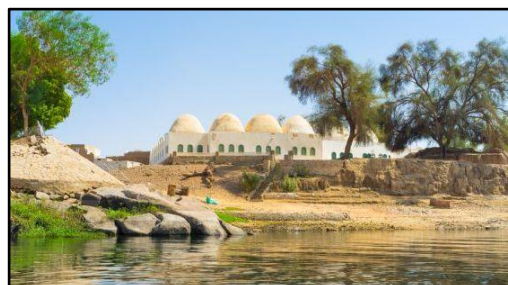
Why I collect Egypt – Mike Murphy (ESC 240) – SE London, UK

I blame Fawzan Mudarres and George Papadimitriou. They were senior prefects at the English School, Cairo (spot the initials?) in the early Fifties when a group of 50 British boarders were sent from the Canal Zone to replace pupils whose parents had been prompted to leave for overseas by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Fawzan was dormitory leader for 12 of us, and though the school was brilliant for the incomers, with visits every weekend, to the Citadel, the mosques, boating on the river, even a “walk” from the Pyramids to Saqqara – there was still a little time to kill.

So George invented a stamp club, as mentioned in the school magazine. He brought stamps from his father’s business, but we most enjoyed exploring Egypt’s issues and searching back through the kings to preciceroy issues. My favourites were the 1933 Airmails, with the British-built Handley Page H.P.42 of Imperial Airways edging its long tortoise-nose past the Pyramids. That little club was the key that opened the door.



But it was a half-falling out of love with journalism that pushed that door open. After a move to Sydney I felt a real surge for archaeology and spent four university years studying ancient Cyprus in daytime while designing *The Sydney Morning Herald* at night. Then back to London, qualified to start a PhD on Egypt’s ancient origins. Challenging work all over Egypt, including Saqqara, Maadi, Abydos and even a blistering summer stay with Alfie Henry at the quaint old museum (*left below*) in Aswan – the best place on earth – living in the German dig house with a mummy at my door on the west side of Elephantine (*right below*) and eventually being rowed back through the Nile dawn to catch the Cairo train with Labib Habachi.



But the lure of Fleet Street proved too strong, and soon it was back to newspapers – with a wonderful opportunity to report for *The Times* from Alexandria on Franck Goddio’s discovery of “Cleopatra’s Palace” in the eastern Harbour... but by now I had learned to pace myself, and after assuring Chairman Mac MacArthur that I had no stamps but plenty of enthusiasm it was thanks to Dennis Clarke, Jim Benians, John Sears, John Grimmer and the like that I was welcomed to the Circle in the mid-Seventies.

I immediately fell in love with researching Egypt’s endless spread of towns and villages and their fascinating postal connections, which led on to Mohamed Shams ed-Din, who sold me 100 countrywide covers at £1 apiece at Cairo 1991, and then to the late great Ibrahim Shoukry, who so gently and patiently guided me through the pitfalls and the delights of the Rural postal service.

Convivial lunch in Covent Garden, then meeting upstairs in the gloomy room above the Peacock pub... for me those were the great days of the Circle! Meetings were well attended, and stunning presentations well received. We have lost a whole generation of wonderful senior members since then, and Covid’s onslaught has led to a sad apathy that remains to be beaten. Our joint love of all things Egypt will win out, of course, but it is going to be quite a battle....!

● We welcome all members’ stories to make this column a regular feature of the QC