Tissue paper commemorative programmes and napkins

Gavin Holman – July 2019

During a fascinating few hours with Steve Hughes in June, discussing and examining the wealth of Besses o’ th’ Barn historical material he is working on, I came across something I had not seen before – a programme for a Besses’ concert printed on a square of thin tissue paper.

There were three example of these commemorative "tissue paper" programmes (about 14" square), very fragile, looking like the sort of thing you sometimes got in restaurants as place mats. They dated from 1906, 1909 & 1937, and I've since found a few other
examples - one of the Garde Republicaine visiting London in 190? and another celebrating the 58th anniversary of the Salvation Army in 1923.

Besses’ final concert before embarking on their second world tour in 1909
Concert celebrating the coronation of George VI in 1937
Allan Littlemore had also discovered some similar programmes inserted into some books in his collection – see https://www.4barsrest.com/articles/2018/1684.asp, and https://www.4barsrest.com/articles/2018/1726.asp

Besses’ concert at Blackpool, 1909
The Teatr Wielki, Warsaw, has just closed an exhibition of nearly sixty tissue paper programme brochures held by the museum. They state that the idea dates back to Victorian England and souvenir programmes produced by Eugène Rimmel. The programmes showcased by the museum were produced in Poland in the 1930s. Restored, these charming ephemeral artifacts even smelled like in the old days, as the original flower fragrances used to perfume the brochures had been recreated, courtesy of Sisley Paris.
In 1887 the British firm John Dickinson Ltd. had acquired decorated napkins from Japan. They overprinted logos and other marketing-related information on top of the napkins, turning them into souvenirs.

Similar commemorative tissue napkins were produced as souvenirs of several other notable events during this period, exhibitions, royal visits etc. Quite often the same basic colour printed square was used with a different, usually monochrome, printed centre with the details of the event and/or visitors.

Here are some further examples of this very ephemeral form of souvenir – given their very fragile nature it is not surprising that so few still exist today.
King & Queen visit Retford & Hull

Death of King Edward VII, 1910

Centenary of Nelson’s death, 1905

Queen Victoria Diamond Jubilee 1897

Stockton to Darlington railway centenary, 1925
Visit of King & Queen of Italy

Duke of Kent’s wedding, 1934

Sinking of the Titanic, 1912

Franco-British Exhibition