



# CHARLES SAUMAREZ SMITH ON... BOOK COLLECTING

Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts, cultural historian Dr Charles Saumarez Smith is a font of knowledge on the worlds of art, architecture and design. His latest book, *East London* (Thames & Hudson), is an insider's guide to the East End, where he has lived since the 1980s, exploring everywhere from Spitalfields to Stratford.

## What kinds of books do you like to collect?

I've been a passionate collector since my bookseller brother encouraged me to buy library editions of classic novels. As an undergraduate, I was addicted to David's book stall in Cambridge, where I bought a complete set of Nikolaus Pevsner's architectural guides cheaply, and architectural books that would now be unobtainable. Now, I buy books when interested in a subject: London, architecture, towns... I also have what my family call the "Travel Cupboard", with maps, guidebooks and literature of place.

## How many books do you own?

I've lost count — not helped by the fact that a while ago my wife got so fed up with the number of books in the house that she arranged for 40 boxes to go to a storage facility in Bedford.

## Where do you source new books for your collection?

I confess that I love Amazon — the ease with which one can find specialist books. I also love Abe — instead of trawling antiquarian bookshops on Charing Cross Road, one can buy rare books at the touch of a button.

## Do you own any rare/antique editions?

A copy of John Evelyn's translation of Fréart de Chambray's *A Parallel of the Ancient Architecture with the Modern* and the first two volumes of Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*. Nowadays, I tend to buy more new books than rare or secondhand ones.

## Who are your favourite authors?

I love *Nairn's London* — my first introduction to the pleasures of roaming the city's more esoteric areas — Pevsner and greatly admire WG Sebald.

## What are your favourite bookshops in London?

Hatchards, across from the Royal Academy, and Heywood Hill, where I once worked delivering books round Mayfair. I also like the bookshop in Louis Vuitton on New Bond Street and John Sandoe Books, off the King's Road, which my second cousin, John de Falbe, runs. For travel guides, it's Daunt Books and Stanfords. Online buying hasn't wholly supplanted the pleasures of browsing and finding books unexpectedly.

## Where do you keep your books?

I have a library, which is a bit out of control. I want to build an extension to create a double-deck library, but at the moment it is sadly unaffordable.

## Do you ever judge a book by its cover when making a purchase?

Yes, I'm often influenced by design and typography, if only subliminally. I think books are likely to survive because they are physical objects, not just sources of information.

## What do you like to read while travelling?

Books about the places we are visiting. When we were in Spain, I read the works of Michael Jacobs. His guidebook about Andalusia is a perfect combination of background information and gazetteer.

## What are your thoughts on Kindles/e-readers?

I don't own one, but I'm eternally grateful to the technology, which allows my wife, who has MS, to read books by asking the machine to turn the page.

## Where's your favourite place to read?

My wife is not keen on comfortable chairs, so most of my reading is done at home on a slightly uncomfortable old sofa, covered in black horsehair.



BENEDICT JOHNSON