

Meet the Collectors- Dermot and Ciaran Rochford

Peter Whitehead



Photos on this page- Dermot and Ciaran Rochford in Blenheim Palace as part of the 2024 CCI Congress in Oxford (top left); Peter Whitehead and Ciaran in the Rochford family home outside Dublin with a selection of the Rochford collection waiting to be admired (right); Dermot and Ciaran with Dermot holding a much-treasured box- board (middle left); banners for their website and shop (bottom):

www.chessantiquesonline.com

www.finerpieces.com



The Rochford collection requires no introduction within chess collecting circles and neither do the affable father and son duo Dermot and Ciaran Rochford. After having been in email conversations with both for several years, I first met Dermot and Ciaran in the 2024 Oxford CCI Congress. I was then lucky enough to visit them this April in the family home on the coast outside Dublin. I spent a lovely day being entertained by wonderful hosts, being able to look at and handle parts of their amazing collection and generally talking all things chess related. The conversation continued over lunch and a pint of Guinness in a local pub after which the lure of admiring more chess sets just became too strong. Although the questions and answers given below were finalised by email after my visit (purely my fault- I wanted to maximise my time with their chess sets!), our conversations were the foundations for what follows below. I should also add that, although Ciaran strictly speaking provided the answers, this was fully discussed by him with his father first.



When did you start collecting chess sets (or chess- related items)? We started collecting in the mid-1980s – which makes me feel quite old saying that...

What was the first item which you acquired? A 9cm Jaques wooden weighted Anderssen set with green label and tilt-top box. We didn't even know who Jaques were at the time...



What inspired you to start collecting? I was a chess player whilst my parents were interested in bric-à-brac so our chess collecting was sort of the intersection of the two interests. I had a summer job in a small antique store- they got in a few Chinese puzzle ball pieces, and we were hooked...

How many sets do you own? It varies a bit, but generally 200 at any one time.

What is your collecting philosophy? As my father and I collect together, it is based on what we can agree upon! Generally, we like sets with character due to age, design or some other aspect such as a specific history or player association.

Do you have a preferred type of set? Or a specific focus or theme to your collection? We started collecting English playing sets because they were available and in our price range, so they hold a special interest for us. As with many collectors, as you progress, you start to develop a taste for the more obscure/rarer sets.

Do you have a favourite chess piece (e.g. king, knight)? I guess the knights have always been a focus for us – probably the same with many collectors given their figural nature, allowing for a lot of variety. The quality of the knights can be the differentiating line between good and outstanding sets – especially when looking at symbolic playing sets.

What are the oldest, rarest and most valuable items in your collection? We have a few current favourites, and it does vary a bit over time. But the 16/17th Century Spanish/Italian set F116 below is a favourite at the moment- the design is very unusual, and it has a lot of character. More detailed information and additional photos can be found on our website at:

https://www.chessantiquesonline.com/rochford_collection/secbig2/ueh.html



What makes your collection special? I guess from my point of view, it is the fact that it is an opportunity for my father and I to work together on something over a long period of time. I live outside Seattle on the West Coast of the USA and my father is back home in Dublin, Ireland. In terms of the collection itself, we have strived to try and have the best examples of many forms of sets from many origins.

What does your collection mean to you personally? It allows us to express our interest in the topic and meet people with similar passions. When we acquire something that needs research, it can be very satisfying when we are able to uncover new information on it with the chess collecting community. For us, it has evolved over the decades from a hobby to an addiction, I guess!

What do you enjoy the most about collecting chess sets? I like the thrill of the hunt. I think my father enjoys the research aspect more.

How has your collection evolved over time? As mentioned, we basically only collected English playing sets for the first 5-10 years. We then met Garrick Coleman and some of the large collectors (like Victor Keats and Thomas Thomson) who were very kind to show us their collections. We then of course aspired to emulate them to some degree, even though our budget was quite limited during that period.

How do you decide which set to add to your collection? We don't really set any criteria. If we see a set that we both like (not always easy to agree upon!), and we feel the set is of the right quality, and the price is fair, then we usually try and buy it. We are relatively flexible in terms of condition and think that we have a reasonable feel for the market.

What pre-requisites must a new acquisition have? Quality and rarity. Over time, we have become more flexible on condition (especially on the very rare sets). We don't usually pass up a set that has had a well-used life if the price is fair.

How do you acquire new items for your collection? We have built some friendships in the chess collecting world over the years and they are kind enough to offer us sets from time to time. We try and keep an eye on the public markets through the internet as well.

If participating in an auction, do you follow a particular strategy? We try and set a limit and stick to it! It does not always happen that way, but we try. Over the last decade, the fees being charged at the physical auction houses have really increased, and the packing and shipping costs must also be accounted for. In addition, buying just on photos has got us burned many times, so we try and build a little buffer in our limit for unexpected condition issues as well.

Do you regularly curate your collection? (e.g. sell/dispose of a set when you acquire a better version? Keep your collection to a certain number of sets?) If so, how do you decide which items to keep or let go off? In our earlier collecting days, we had no option other than to sell some of our existing sets to allow us to buy whatever set had captured our imagination that we really could not afford. Growing out of this, we setup an online store at www.finerpieces.com. After having a set 20 years, it is sometimes good to move it on to someone new and it helps us fund our next purchase as well. On what we decide to sell, a few things can affect that- perhaps our tastes have changed a little over the years, or a friend/client we know is looking for a specific set we have. Sometimes we end up with 2-3 similar sets which makes letting one go a little easier.

What is your most surprising/unexpected find? Many years ago, we bought a nice boxboard and Calvert set. The old write-up on it is in the Chess Collector Magazine Volume XVI, no 3, 2007, and at https://www.chessantiquesonline.com/Favorite_chess_set.pdf. As always, my father has been very supportive and enabled us to start collecting even though buying antiques sets in the mid- 1980s put a strain on the family budget.

What was your most disastrous acquisition? There have been many! Once we stretched our budget and bought a very good European bust set from a well- known auction house. The cost made me sweat, and I was hoping my father would be ok with it once it arrived and he saw it in person. The set came with a boxboard. We gave detailed instructions on how the chess pieces should be packed. A large parcel was delivered to my father- the boxboard was wonderfully packed, but the pieces were left to roll around inside totally unwrapped – and as a result 30 out of 32 pieces were very badly damaged. The painful saga for this set continued from there...

Which set do you regret not acquiring when you could have done? There have been many such sets, but to be fair they were all beyond what we could afford, so we can live with those misses. We were once offered a very good early Amber boxboard- wonderful, but in poor condition for what seemed like a very large sum to us. In retrospect, I think we should have gone for it, but financially it would have been a stretch, and our wives were, shall we say, not too excited about the idea!

If you could add any set to your collection, which one would it be and why? There are many but I have always admired the early Augsburg Figural Sets. I think the overall design and execution of these sets is outstanding.

If your collection was going up in flames and you could only save one set, which one would it be? And why? That is a good question- one or two sets my father gave me as gifts many years ago, so they have sentimental value. We do also like the very early Italian bust set F63 shown below and would want to save it if at all possible. For more information and photos:

https://www.chessantiquesonline.com/rochford_collection/secbig/ritabust.html



What is the long- term vision for your collection? We hope to continue to find the more unusual and finer versions of sets that appeal to us. It would also be great to be able to add some additional information/knowledge to the hobby in relation to specific sets or makers. I think the set P289 we recently acquired which provides the missing link to Foster as a maker is a good example. For more information and

additional photos, please refer to:

https://www.chessantiquesonline.com/rochford_collection/secbig3/fostup.html



Have you considered the legacy of your collection? Not really. We hope our online presence will help others interested in this area for some time to come.

What advice would you give to a new collector? Please share your insight and expertise. I guess the more pieces/sets you can handle and see in person, the quicker you can decide what sets are of interests to you. We bought some part sets/single pieces over the years when we could not afford/find a complete set – I think this is also helpful.

How do you store, maintain and display your chess- related items? Because we have limited space that we are allowed to use for display in our homes, we really rely on our websites www.chessantiquesonline.com and www.finerpieces.com to see our sets. We try and update these sites monthly once we have new things to share and we have a monthly associated email newsletter that people can sign up for.

Do you fix issues with pieces yourself? If so, what is your top repairing tip? No, we don't have the skills on that side of things. We use Ron Fromkin in Florida- he is great and very helpful (email: ivoryrepair@yahoo.com). We highly recommend him.

Do you play chess and if so, at what level? Yes- my father actually taught me when I was child. I am weaker now, but when I was sixteen, I went to the world junior tournament representing Ireland. I was fortunate enough to become friends with a young Alexei Shirov- a few blitz games with him quickly showed me that my future did not lie in playing chess.

How long have you been a member of CCI and what do you enjoy about CCI? I guess a long time, 30+ years. We really enjoy the magazine and the events that the hard- working organizers put together. We hope to be able to attend more of them going forward than we have in the past.

Do you have other collections beyond chess- related items? Not really. I have a few remote- controlled planes, but that collection quickly shrinks once I start flying them... sometimes the "landings" are less than ideal!

Tell us one thing about you that no- one would guess? I came second in a women's tennis tournament – my wife and I were taking some beginner lessons, the club held a friendly tournament, and due to my Irish Christian name (Ciaran), I was incorrectly put in the women's draw. As no- one was available to change the draw, I had to play... I came second and have a second- place trophy with a woman on top to prove it! I did have a lot of explaining to do each time I met a new opponent that day...