



# *Sheetlines*

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“Kerry musings”

*David Archer*

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

## ***Kerry musings***

***David Archer***

In response to Richard Oliver's closely argued advocacy of maps folded small and packed to the gunnels,<sup>1</sup> I would like to promote flat sheets with lovely wide margins, or if folded maps, retaining good margins. As will become clear, I am all in favour of white space, the more the better, whether it be round the edges of maps or as the background to the London Transport roundel. Few things in life are more enjoyable than opening a ream of pure white, crisp, A4 paper. There is not enough soothing white space these days, the total opposite being those dreadful American websites that have a black background which make you bristle and click away from them as soon as they appear. Usually black with gold writing. The pits.

Some of the finest wide white borders are found on Ordnance Survey late nineteenth century maps of Africa produced for the Geographical Section General Staff. Whoever designed them set out to produce not only the cartographic item intended, but additionally, something that would stand on its own as a piece of art, with the wide borders forming an integral frame, allowing the eye to see the printed map well away from any surrounding distraction; a pleasure to behold. Not for these designers were things to be a whisker from the sheet edge, where they could so easily be damaged by a slight chip or scuff; no, the map was protected by the margin, and sometimes aesthetically enhanced by dated blind stamps top centre.

The Old Series full sheets established deep margins, which were continued with the quarter sheets, where wide margins were necessary to accommodate the use of copper plates for printing, as Richard notes. Thus, we have a map, surrounded by its border, marginalia, the impression of the plate edge, and then lovely white space before the sheet edge. How different things would have been if there were only 5mm of white paper before the sheet edge. Trimmed within 5mm of its life and no room for a blind stamp. Yes, it was fortuitous that wide borders existed when the idea of blind stamps was hit upon, not to mention when extrusions were needed, or when a member of the library staff stood over a map, wielding an inked possession stamp looking for a place to plonk it (plonk: Library Association technical term for the placing of a possession stamp).

Without a good acreage of paper beyond the neat line, owners are unable to write in the margins, and those slanting next town names sticking out beyond the map would not tell us that Welshpool was 3 miles north of the sheet under inspection. I am sure that everyone reading this has seen notes written in the margin of a map: birds, flowers and butterflies seen, lunches eaten, poetry composed. Being able to see how previous owners lived would cease if margins vanished in the cause of weight reduction. Not that I agree with writing within a map margin, and even less can I abide a margin that shows signs of the map having been folded. A pristine white margin if folded is like a series of footprints

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<sup>1</sup> 'Is there an optimum size for topographic maps?' *Sheetlines* 109, 42.

in virgin snow. Sullied. Yes, I know that an impression from a printing plate has a similar effect, but they are meant to be there and are as old as the map, not the result of a quick fold last week or whenever.

A map designer stints the use of white space at their peril.

Consider the two extracts on page 49 of Richard's article. That on the right is far more luxurious, by using more white space than the extract on the left, which has a mean narrow space between the frame and neat line. The writing even has to break the frame, the space is so limited. Elsewhere on this sheet, county names and boundaries have been treated in an equally tight-fisted way. Inspect any 1:50,000 sheet to see how un-cluttered the border is and how clear and relaxed are the county names and next towns. We have not even reached as far out as the margin and the more generous use of white space can already be seen as good practice, resulting in a far clearer production. I defy anyone to say they find figure 1 easier to read and more attractive than figure 2.

I would hope that any course on map design considers the whole sheet, rather than solely what goes on within the neat line. To me, a map is not only something that portrays a landscape in the most accurate and easily understood way, it should also have aesthetic merit, something that Richard ignores in his pursuit of the functional. Sir Charles Close obviously felt that folded maps should be aesthetically pleasing or we would not have had Arthur Palmer and Ellis Martin working on cover design, marketing and publicity. Maps need a correct and pleasingly balanced white space between the various elements of map, legend and anything else on the sheet, otherwise the whole thing appears cramped and squeezed. These elements, if well-proportioned and set out in a satisfying way, can also be economical with paper usage.

I am unable to take seriously the proposal that paper size should be reduced in order to lessen the weight of a map. The only maps that I recall as being 'heavy', however defined, were some very large dissected maps with a thick gauge hessian backing and strong quarter-inch thick card covers. All right, I know that when preparing to walk to the South Pole, explorers remove the paper wrappings from a couple of hundred Mars Bars to achieve a minimum weight to be hauled, but a Sunday afternoon walk with an *Explorer* is not in this league. When did you last need to carry several maps in one pocket? The supposedly 'unnecessary extravagance' of white space on five *Explorers* or *Landrangers* carried on a long-distance walking holiday could be more than offset by not taking a second spare woolly hat.

I do not have my tape measure to hand, but would bet on some of the small duvet-sized double-sided *Outdoor Leisure* maps, being amongst those that offer 'better value for money': a statement with which I have always disagreed. True, they do give more mapped area per pound sterling, but are *poor* value for money, as Richard eventually illustrates since large maps do not function well in all situations. Forget the quality, look at the quantity? I disagree. OK, wide margins *might* mean a map will cost more, but most people I know are willing to pay a bit more for quality, rather than skimping. Indeed, from experience I have found that given the choice between a map with side margins cropped but

heavily reduced in price, and the same map un-cropped at full price, the latter sells every time. People are willing to pay for white space. If you want cheaper maps, keep the attractive white space on maps but have plain white covers bearing just a series and sheet number. No attractive covers on Ordnance Survey maps? Most unwelcome.

When primitive societies rise above a certain level, they start to experiment with decoration, something not needed for survival. The same holds for maps, where we do not need a minimalist product. Many of us were attracted to OS maps by their sheer beauty, and purely functional objects are seldom beautiful. Consider the double-sided *Ringwood, Wimborne and Ferndown* Neighbourhood map, *Map cover art* image 170, an accumulation of eight un-captioned map extracts, lacking any hint of the word design, and probably the outcome of a problem-solving exercise: cram these map extracts onto this sheet of paper. Open it out, turn it over, and the maps are upside down. Design? What design? In map making, there are depths which should not be plumbed. By contrast the *Cambridge City Map*, edition A, 1979 has nice wide top and lower margins and is a joy to behold, even though there is no sheet title, which I do like on a map. Alas, the later editions have a reduced border in order to accommodate a shorter integral cover of the desired length and are cramped by comparison. Again, the Ordnance Survey Bi-Centenary set of the Seventh Series are a joy to look at. New, crisp, paper flat sheets with full margins. They glow. How different they would look if the margins had been trimmed. Not the same beast at all.

Many of us never consider the design of most things we buy; we just use them. And if there are minor inconveniences, we grumble a little and accept them. This applies to maps as well. I am sure that most members feel as frustrated as Richard that an *Explorer* does not sit easily in a pocket, or that the bit of the legend you want can never be found, but few have gone to the length of sitting down and producing a new specification as Richard has. A specification he would prefer. I would prefer a more attractive specification with creative white space. Perhaps the answer is to extend the possibilities of the 'Custom Map', and allow more features such as legends and margins to be manipulated or even eliminated?

Many aspects of life are being minimised, and not necessarily for the general good. I see a 'fragments' society developing, where pupils have only studied a chapter of a novel or one act of a play, where brief tweets are the preferred channel of communication, rather than considered argued statements. Space is needed to appreciate an object. A visit to an antiques hypermarket with stuff piled high and densely packed, is so different from a museum visit where a case might contain a single object. Which is easier to study? Space and white space provide the answer.

Surely the diagram at the end of Richard's article is a strong argument for the generous use of white space, if only because it is so inadequate. Why? Because it is almost impossible to read. Why? Because it is too small. OK, I know that the Editor of *Sheetlines* walks a tight rope, and using a full page for such a minimalist diagram might seem extravagant, but in this case I do wish plenty of white space could have been found.

Whist I agree with Richard Oliver that some folded maps are too large for the average pocket, I feel his suggestion that maps be pared down to the bare minimum is over the top, because it is exceedingly difficult to be both minimalist and attractive. The modern Ordnance Survey is not up to this challenge. An OS map should at least be attractive, which they are, even if the beauty of olden days has long vanished. I am indifferent to the folded size of a map as I never carry one in a pocket, but I do object most strongly to the sheet size of the large double-sided Outdoor Leisure maps, which are impossible to use, even in a friendly environment. Of course, if we insist on having more mapped area for our money, we could try having maps of a smaller scale, which will not go down too well with the eyesight of an ageing population.



*The Cambridge map referred to by David Archer, reduced to fit the page. The actual size of this extract is about 9 inches wide by about 4 inches high. The 'white space' top margin is over 1½ inches deep.*

### **Rowley Award 2018**

Have you ever thought "I could write something like that" after reading an article in *Sheetlines*? If you have, then your article and the piece that inspired you might well be in line for the £50 prize given as the Rowley Award.

The Rowley Award is not for the best article, nor for the most scholarly, but for an article which the judges believe will inspire others to write for *Sheetlines*. It acknowledges those who have set an example for others to follow.

*Sheetlines* is a depository, not only for scholarly research, but also for more everyday Ordnance Survey observations and discoveries.

So, start thinking, and hopefully writing for the April issue, and if you miss that, then what you write will be considered for the next prize. The only condition is that you have not had more than one piece published previously, apart from snippets and letters.