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“Lows of Britain”

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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.

Lows of Britain

Peter Haigh

There have been numerous writings about the highest points, either by country or county or whatever, for Britain. Not least this journal has entered the discussion at various times. Some of us can even remember the metric height of a mountain, as well as its imperial height. When a friend of mine asked “What is the lowest point in Britain?” I was a somewhat startled when I realised how little seemed to have been written on this comparable topic.

Another friend, overhearing the question, immediately answered “Westminster” and “Bingo” was my response to that, in that cynical autumn of 2019. However, let us reformulate the question in a more precise form for this august journal.

‘What is the lowest altitude recorded by the Ordnance Survey on any of their printed maps?’.

I regret that I do not have sufficient maps, and particularly recent maps, to provide a definitive answer to this question. I can provide some information to get the ball rolling and these details seem to be of sufficient interest to be worth sharing. What follows relates entirely to Great Britain; perhaps others can provide details for the island of Ireland.

In at least two locations, current mapping shows the zero contour line; there are possibly others. These are south of the Lincolnshire village of Wroot and NW of Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. These zero contours appear on *Landranger* 112, Scunthorpe & Gainsborough, *Explorer* 280, Isle of Axeholme, and *Landranger* 131, Boston & Spalding, *Explorer* 235, Wisbech, respectively. The spot heights in these areas are almost all along the roads, which are themselves embanked above the surrounding fields. I have not yet found any zero or negative spot heights, though there are some in both areas of 1[m].

On the Seventh Series one-inch mapping, the sheets are 103, Doncaster and 124, King’s Lynn. Neither of these gives a zero contour line shown on the later 1:50,000 mapping. There are two spot heights of 1[ft] at TF 383133 and TF 403137. Such earlier one-inch mapping that I have for these areas has no apparent significant differences from the Seventh Series.

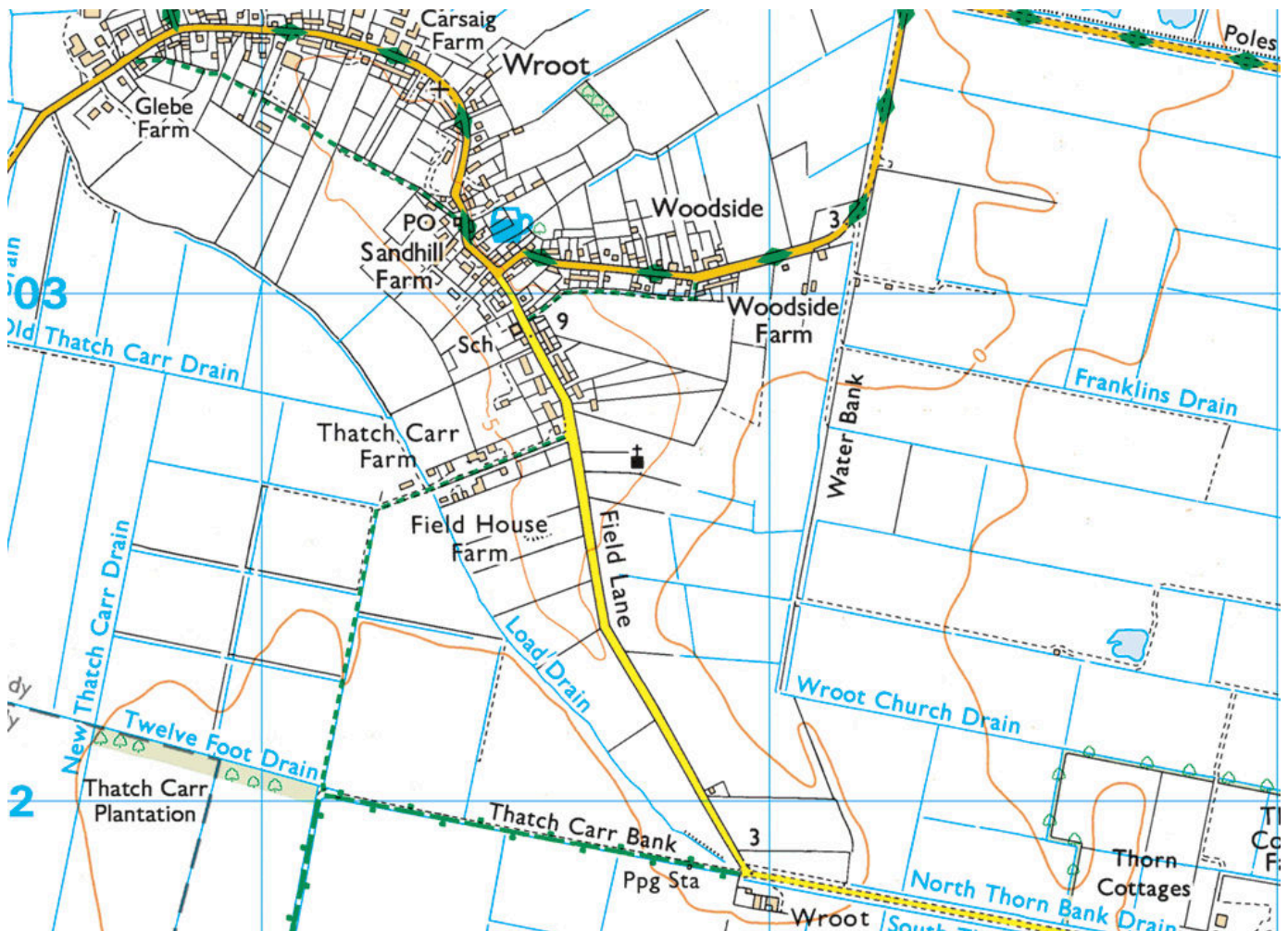
By chance, it happens that both these areas are at the intersection of three counties. The commendable NLS website is at its least friendly where three sets of six-inch county sheet-lines are superimposed. I have therefore confined my investigation of earlier larger scale maps for these areas to the 1:25,000 maps of the 1950s. I have found nothing in these online searches to add to my comments of the contemporary one-inch mapping mentioned above.

Two other incidentals can be noted about the area south of Wroot. First it is the site of the 1801 base line measurement at Misterton Carr and secondly, although at such a low altitude, this area is over 40 miles inland from Spurn Point.

Underwater, the situation is rather more complex than might first be imagined. In Loch Morar, the one-inch sheet 35 records sub-‘marine’ contours at 100 feet intervals down to a 200 yard length at 1000 [ft]. The later 1:50,000 sheet 40 has contours at 50 metre intervals down to a length of 1.8km at 300 [m] depth.

Therefore, although the 300m depth is slightly shallower, a resurvey has greatly extended the area given as this depth. In both cases, shallower lochs in the adjacent area have the contours below water level at more frequent intervals. For England, the first underwater recording that I have found appeared in the Lake District in 1945. Wast Water not only has 50 foot contours down to 250 [ft] but also a spot height for the surface of the lake, 200 [ft]. This latter vanished with the introduction of the Seventh Series mapping. On the 1:50,000 sheet, contours are at 10 metre intervals down to 70 [m]. (Intriguingly, there are two differences in recording depths in the change from one-inch to 1:50,000 mapping. In Crummock Water, where the surface spot height of 321 [ft] is only present on the earlier one-inch sheets, the depth lines are annotated 21, 71 and 121 [ft]; the 1:50,000 just has lines at 10, 20, etc. metre intervals below the surface. The one-inch provides no depth details in reservoirs such as Haweswater but these are given on the 1:50,000 maps). In contrast to the above, no water depths are found on the 1:25,000 maps of the Lake District.

So my findings to date for Great Britain are at least two areas shown on current mapping with the zero contour line, which is not shown on earlier mapping at these locations and, on the one-inch, a couple of spot heights given as 1 [ft]. Can anybody improve on this?



Zero contour near Wroot, North Lincolnshire (SE 714030)