



# *Sheetlines*

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for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“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***

Was it in a previous issue of *Sheetlines* that I read of an Ordnance Survey map on waterproof paper being folded into a hat and worn in the rain? Although this was not what the OS intended the use to be, it does show the versatility of OS maps, which offer far more than an image of the landscape on the date of survey or revision.

I assume and generalise to say that the intention of the young Ordnance Survey was that the first states of Old Series sheets were to show where everything was in relation to everything else in order to help one get around. But from the very beginning, other unintended attributes were attached to these maps. Many were considered a status symbol for the owners; they impressed visitors if displayed on a wall or were given as presents. And in the two centuries since, even more uses have been found for OS maps, over and above landscape depiction. So, what other uses have OS maps been put to that were never considered in the early days?

Well, they appear in books, usually as map extracts but occasionally whole maps have been folded and included. The OS has never done much for such projects, except issue a license and maybe charge a fee, with the user doing all the work and being charged for it. Good eh? Map extracts have long been used in examinations, and again could never have been envisaged in 1801. Indeed, map studies, or whatever they are now called, did not exist; the Ordnance Survey has a strong claim to bringing them into existence by producing the studied maps. I wonder whether French schools study IGN maps in the same way? And whilst on the subject of books, I wish that I had kept a record of every time I have read, or been told of, a piece in a novel where someone consulted *the ordnance map*. Not any old map was consulted, but the ordnance map, which was significant as it gave authority to what was found on it. The OS never set out to have their maps quoted in novels, but they have been. In the same way, OS maps appear frequently in relation to the law. They accompanied requests for acts of parliament; they are used in legal arguments concerning boundaries and footpaths, where again, what is shown is held in high regard by many professional and lay people. Situations not originally envisaged.

Examples abound of OS maps being used to support or even create hobbies or interests. In the last issue of *Sheetlines* Frank Iddiols told us of his interest in the bench marks shown on maps and his search for them. Nobody is going to convince me that this was envisaged by the OS when it was decided to show bench marks. Yes, they might have assumed bench marks would be sought, but not as a hobby. In the same issue Richard Oliver produced a piece on the treatment of 'trams' on various map series, an approach which illustrates just how useful OS

maps are for historical research, something not possible when the very first sheets were issued, but eminently possible in increasing degrees as revision after revision and series after series followed.

When preparing a new map specification, has the Ordnance Survey ever taken into account that what is produced will be compared with earlier maps for a whole range of reasons? No. I do not believe they have ever provided detail in order that it can be compared with older maps. If users decide to do so, that is their privilege, and if any detail is now omitted, or given in a more generalised form, tough. But in the eyes of many people older states of OS maps do not automatically acquire usefulness for historical studies; it takes time. In the late 1980s we could not sell large scale maps issued post-1945. No-one was interested in them, with local historians saying they were too recent to be of interest, whilst professional people such as architects wanted the latest state; five years old was not good enough. Today, sixty year old maps are very much to the liking of local historians, prompting forgotten memories of childhood, which can be written about with authority.

Most of us would agree that whoever drew up the specifications for many map series, especially coloured maps, did an excellent job in creating visually attractive products. Not that they were necessarily looking to be attractive, more a desire for clarity. That these maps appeal to and are used by others for non-cartographic reasons is by the way. A hundred years ago, the OS began using decorative covers to attract attention to, and hopefully increase sales of, small scale maps. This very same attractiveness has continued to be used by others. The map shop in Hay on Wye usually has a good selection of Populars in the window, advertising that they sell Ordnance Survey, as well as older maps, and most of us have seen maps used as displays in bookshops over the years. Indeed, it was when I was paying for a book and saw a Popular edition on a bookshop counter that I first started on the slippery slope. The advertising industry is always on the lookout for good props: a very nice coloured Damart advert from about twenty years ago, shows an elegant pair of men's grey trousers, with colour added by the model holding a Popular beside one leg; Popular sheet 54 Nottingham adorns the cover of Alan Sillitoe's *Down From The Hill*. And yet again I ask, why do so many find Populars above all other series so attractive?

Over the years, I have probably had about a dozen artists contact me seeking maps to use in their work. Most have said that they find OS maps and their colours attractive, whilst only a couple have been very specific and wanted a particular series. Someone, who will remain anonymous, as I cannot recall his name, did some lovely creations using Seventh Series mapping which were exhibited in several galleries in the 1990s. Another group are those who wanted to use maps as wallpaper, and here, most definitely, the Seventh Series was preferred. Usually the tÿ bach was the chosen room, but one summer a good customer went on

holiday and left his decorators to paper the stairwell from the basement up to the attic of a three storey London house using Seventh Series maps, with Land's End in the basement to Shetland at the top. Luckily, I had an excellent stock of maps in mint condition in the all red covers. From the photographs, the result looked exceptional. What would William Mudge have made of it all?

In my book, postcards are ideally suited to having maps on them. Over the years, a few commercial concerns produced postcards with OS maps on the front, all very bitty, nothing serious, and then the Ordnance Survey hit on the idea of what they called location postcards. These were map extracts, obviously, centred on a specific location with the addition of a little artwork such as an arrow pointing to the exact building and maybe a logo or company name. A similar idea to the current custom maps. Several hundred different cards were produced of various scales. Although the cards seem to have been quite popular, the OS stopped offering them, but the idea of using map extracts was taken up by others, especially if location centred, with the result that curtains, cushions, table mats, you name it, all appeared decorated with maps. Gift shops in small towns offered cushions with an OS map of the town centre on it. Some very nice cloth table napkins for one society wedding had an extract of the 1920 coloured six-inch map of York.

The paper used for National Grid large scale plans has always been of exceptional quality; so much so that when I had a vast pile of the things in mint condition that I could not bring myself to take to the recycling centre, I offered them to the local play group and primary school. Turn the maps over and the strong white paper is excellent for drawing on, and of a far higher quality than these groups could ever have afforded.

And then we arrive at maps as objects to collect, with an emphasis on the word objects. I defy anyone to argue that for those who collect different map covers, the maps are of more than secondary interest, just as some collect groups of maps, for example manoeuvre maps, not for what is shown, but because each map is different. Differences are collected, not maps. Yes, the early Old Series were envisaged along the lines of county maps, and it was expected that those buying them would seek the whole county, but in my book, this was not collecting. It would be interesting to find the first reference to an Ordnance Survey map collection, in the sense of the collections held by our members. Would it refer to an individual or a library? When did the legal deposit libraries commence collecting after realising that they lacked some maps, revised reprints and such, or that they had few examples of different map covers? Again, it would be interesting to put Mudge in a room with a display of early Old Series, and a modest collection of later Ordnance Survey maps, put together around two hundred years on by one of several hundred members of the Ordnance Survey's fan club. His Old

Series can only be seen as maps, whilst the collection would consist mostly of objects.

Before 1990, if anyone at the OS had thought about it, they might have suggested that on average maybe six or seven different people, would look at any given map in its lifetime, giving it a pretty limited circulation. But with the internet and websites devoted to Ordnance Survey maps, many, many more people are liable to look at a given sheet. From anywhere in the world. With the rise of computer technology and all the associated gadgets, the Ordnance Survey has pretty swiftly fallen into line, by providing purchasers of some hard copy maps, access to a digital version which can be downloaded to a smartphone or tablet. Undoubtedly hard copy maps are declining in importance, with the OS considering itself a data provider, rather than a map publisher, and libraries increasingly offering holdings on-line. The National Library of Scotland website amongst others presents OS maps in a way that the OS never intended, nay was never able to envisage. Seamless maps, where the margins have been cropped and the maps butted together, presented on a website rather than adorning a stairwell.

As quizzes are such a popular feature of *Sheetlines* I will end with a question : with OS maps decorating lamp shades, cushions and table mats, what OS extracts would you suggest for decorative male or female clothing or underwear? Answers should not be sent either to me or the editors, thank you.



***Haute Contour***

*Former OS Director General Vanessa Lawrence, in her natty MasterMap coat  
at the CCS AGM, Explorer House, Southampton, May 2014*

*(Picture: John Davies)*